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# Hegel on Beauty

Julia Peters



# Hegel on Beauty

‘This is an excellent study, careful and straightforward, of a still neglected area in Hegel studies. It joins a select few recent works taking account of student transcripts of the Berlin lectures on philosophy of art. Its main contribution is to bring to bear Hegel’s ‘Anthropology’ on the interpretation of Hegel’s theory of beauty. The linkage has been mentioned before but seldom emphasized. Here it is used to support the position that Hegel’s conception of beauty does not privilege art over nature: on the contrary, art brings out the beauty of *human nature* in the shape of the idealized human body, considered as expression of soul or mind.’

—*Martin Donougho, University of South Carolina-Columbia, USA*

While the current philosophical debate surrounding Hegel’s aesthetics focuses heavily on the philosopher’s controversial ‘end of art’ thesis, its participants rarely give attention to Hegel’s ideas on the nature of beauty and its relation to art. This study seeks to remedy this oversight by placing Hegel’s views on beauty front and center. Peters asks us to rethink the common assumption that Hegelian beauty is exclusive to art and argues that for Hegel beauty, like art, is subject to historical development. Her careful analysis of Hegel’s notion of beauty not only has crucial implications for our understanding of the ‘end of art’ and Hegel’s aesthetics in general, but also sheds light on other fields of Hegel’s philosophy, in particular his anthropology and aspects of his ethical thought.

**Julia Peters** is assistant professor in philosophy at the University of Tübingen, Germany. She specializes in Kant and German idealism and has published a number of articles on Hegel’s Aesthetics, Anthropology and Philosophy of Mind. In addition, she works on contemporary virtue ethics.

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**Julia Peters**

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# Introduction

## ART AND BEAUTY IN MODERNITY

The status of art has become precarious in modernity. As Theodor W. Adorno puts it in the opening statement of his *Aesthetic Theory*: 'It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist'.<sup>1</sup> One of the first places where such uneasiness concerning the place of art in modernity has been formulated are Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*: the *Aesthetics* have given rise to the famous debate about the 'end of art' that continues until today. Clearly, the positions defended in this debate today are no longer as extreme as they once were. In fact, among scholars currently working on Hegel's aesthetics, very few still believe that art literally comes to an end in modernity in Hegel's view. Rather, in the past two decades or so, a number of important contributions have emerged that suggest a variety of ways in which the modern arts can be seen with Hegel as having significance and value.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, all participants in this debate will acknowledge that from a Hegelian point of view, the claim that art continues to be of value in modernity requires considerable argument and justification. We cannot simply assume that this is the case. In this sense, art has become problematic in modernity for Hegel.

The notion of beauty is rarely discussed explicitly in relation to Hegel's supposed thesis of the 'end of art' today. This is somewhat surprising, because arguably one of the most straightforward ways of explaining why for Hegel the status of art is precarious in modernity draws crucially on Hegel's understanding of beauty and its relation to art. According to this reading, Hegel holds that there is an essential connection between beauty and art: objects are works of art partly in virtue of being beautiful. However, the status of beauty has become problematic in modernity from Hegel's point of view, such that we can no longer take for granted that it has or ought to have value for us. Therefore, the status and value of art can no longer be taken for granted either. Even independent of Hegel, the idea that the ideal of beauty faces a crisis of legitimacy in modernity has immediate and intuitive appeal, in contrast to the much more controversial thesis about the end of art. Many phenomena and developments in modern and

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contemporary art testify to the fact that in modernity artists have begun to distance themselves from the ideal of beauty for reasons that are certainly manifold and contested. This observation does not in itself provide any reason for skepticism regarding the future and continuing significance of art, as one may hold that modern art in particular has plenty to offer besides beauty. If one assumes with Hegel, on the other hand, that the connection between art and beauty is non-accidental and that any 'emancipation' of art from beauty will be a problematic and contentious affair, then the uneasy status of beauty in modernity is inevitably going to lead to questions concerning the legitimacy of art itself.

From this point of view, then, one fundamental motivation for Hegel's worries about the status of art in modernity is a worry about the status of beauty. Accordingly, if we want to understand Hegel's views on the place of art in modernity, we need to elucidate his notion of beauty. This is what this book aims to do by offering a comprehensive interpretation of Hegel's conception of beauty.

If art in modernity is said to stand or fall with beauty on Hegel's account, the most pressing question at this point is why beauty should be thought to be in a precarious position in modernity in his view. By way of setting the stage for the argument of the book, I want to offer a first approach to answering this question in the following section. This answer will be developed in much more detail throughout the book. Here I only want to introduce an important thesis that underlies it. This is the thesis that for Hegel the epitome of (artistic) beauty is to be found in ancient Greek art, or more generally, in the ancient Greek culture. As Hegel puts it: 'In classical art the notion of beauty is realized; nothing can become more beautiful'.<sup>3</sup> In light of this thesis, it becomes immediately plausible to proceed to argue that beauty has a certain historical 'environment' for Hegel and may be out of place in modernity. Such considerations also connect the present question in important ways to a debate that seems to have somewhat petered out today, but which was once of central concern to commentators on Hegel's aesthetics: the debate on whether Hegel was a neoclassicist. Neoclassicism, in essence, is the thesis that classical Greek art is exemplary due to its unsurpassed beauty and thus provides a standard that should be emulated by all works of art. Now, since Hegel holds that classical Greek art is unsurpassed in its beauty, he seems to share certain central neoclassicist views. On the other hand, in his view no normative standard for future works of art can be derived from classical Greek art because beauty is out of place in modernity. This means that if Hegel is a neoclassicist, his is a peculiar version of neoclassicism indeed.

### HEGEL—A NEOCLASSICIST?

In order to clarify to what extent Hegel shares neoclassicist views, it will be helpful to start by recapitulating a classification of different forms of

eighteenth and nineteenth century neoclassicism that Helmut Kuhn offers in his essay on Hegel's relation to the German neoclassicist tradition.<sup>4</sup> Alluding to Schiller's distinction between naïve and sentimental poetry, Kuhn distinguishes (without meaning to imply any evaluative connotation) between a 'naïve' and a 'reflective' form of neoclassicism. Both have in common that they see Greek art as embodying the 'perfection of art',<sup>5</sup> due to the beauty it exhibits. The naïve neoclassicist is naïve in the sense that he sees no fundamental historical distance between himself and the Greeks; or, if he sees a distance, he does not consider it as limiting or even undermining the potential of Greek art to function as a guiding model for the art of his own time. For Kuhn, J. J. Winckelmann is the quintessential naïve neoclassicist. Winckelmann appeals to the artists of his time to emulate the Greek ideal of art without raising the question to what extent it makes sense or is even possible to revive ancient Greek art in his own time. He does not raise this question because he sees no rigid opposition between his own historical situation and the historical situation of ancient Greece. This also means that there is no necessity for him to justify the notion that there is some meaningful historical continuity between his own time and the ancient Greek culture. Rather, this continuity is simply assumed and reflected in the artist's and theorist's 'dedication'<sup>6</sup> to the Greek ideal, his 'admiration and adoration'<sup>7</sup> for it. We do not need to pursue the question here whether Kuhn is right at classifying Winckelmann as naïve in this sense.<sup>8</sup> More important for our purposes is Kuhn's depiction of the contrasting reflective neoclassicist, on the basis of which he offers a perceptive assessment of Hegel's position. The reflective neoclassicist is reflective in the sense that he starts from the observation of a fundamental historical distance between himself and the Greek culture in which beauty has been brought to perfection. This distance must be reflected or taken into account in his view of whether, how and to what extent we are to emulate the Greeks. The reflective neoclassicist is impressed by a problem of historical distance between us and the Greeks that does not even arise from the point of view of the naïve neoclassicist. This does not mean that the reflective neoclassicist rejects the notion, central to Winckelmann's view, that we moderns should emulate the Greeks. However, for him, to emulate the Greeks means to recreate Greek beauty under radically different historical conditions and perhaps in different form. The first one to take neoclassicist thought in this direction, on Kuhn's account, is Schiller; a similar view is formulated in Schlegel. Goethe and Humboldt, too, hold on to the idea of a Renaissance of Greek art under historical conditions that are substantially different from those of the Greeks. It is only in Hegel, finally, that we see a radical break away from the notion that the Greeks ought to be imitated or that Greek beauty ought to be recreated. And this is the case even though Hegel at the same time holds on to the neoclassicist credo that beauty comes to perfection in Greek art. Thus Hegel takes reflective neoclassicism one step further: rather than merely believing that it is difficult for us to recreate Greek beauty in our historical situation,

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he holds that we *ought* not to recreate it. The obvious question, then, is why Hegel believes this.

Before inquiring into the reasons underlying Hegel's radical move, we should pause to consider that the sketch of the Hegelian argument about art and beauty in modernity with which we started out above has now become enriched with further assumptions and thus presents itself in a new guise. The argument now goes like this: works of art are essentially beautiful. In order to be genuinely beautiful, all art has to emulate ancient Greek art. But such emulation is not appropriate in modernity in Hegel's view. Therefore, the value and significance of art as such becomes questionable in modernity.

The premise in Hegel's argument we now need to consider more closely is the thesis that it is no longer appropriate in modernity to emulate ancient Greek beauty. It is hardly controversial that Hegel holds this view; however, there is ample room for disagreement with regard to the line of reasoning that leads him to hold it. Most commentators read this thesis as being grounded in the observation of a fundamental distance between modernity and the ancient Greek culture: for Hegel, Greek beauty is essentially a reflection of the ancient Greek cultural, political and moral stance; however, the cultural, political and moral stance of modernity is radically different from that of the Greeks; therefore, recreating Greek beauty is no longer appropriate or desirable for us moderns, as we would be in danger of compromising our own values if we were to do so.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, these values are taken to revolve around the central ideal of freedom, understood as rational self-determination or autonomy.

However, I would suggest that such a reading of Hegel's thesis about the inappropriateness of Greek beauty can never be fully satisfying, either in itself or from Hegel's point of view.<sup>10</sup> The problem is that as long as beauty, as exemplified in ancient Greek art, is considered to be a value in its own right, the mere finding that it is *incompatible* with the values of modernity may lead to two directly opposed conclusions. One might either reject beauty on the basis of the values of modernity; or else one might reject the values of modernity in reference to the value of beauty. In other words, if the value of beauty is merely found to be incompatible with central values of modernity, one might as well take this as a reason for working towards an 'end of modernity' rather than for declaring that beauty no longer ought to be created in modernity. Why not reject whatever values are constitutive of modernity in Hegel's view if they require us to give up on beauty? The interpretation just sketched would seem to allow for such a question to be legitimately raised. However, I do not think that such a stalemate situation between modernity and ancient Greek beauty is what Hegel has in mind. Thus I would suggest that some further argument is needed in order to make Hegel's dismissal of ancient Greek beauty fully plausible—we need to understand why and how Hegel's criticism of beauty is an instance of immanent, rather than of external critique, to put it in Hegelian terms. One of

the aims of this study is to develop such an argument. The central idea here is that for Hegel, the reason why we moderns ought not to emulate Greek beauty is not based on a difference between the Greek culture and our own (or between their values and our own), but rather on a deficiency within Greek beauty itself. In other words, what is problematic about Greek beauty is not that it is incompatible with the values of modernity, but that it gives expression to and is grounded in an idea that is ultimately inconsistent. This means that the Greeks would have had as much reason as we do to question the ultimate significance and value of beauty from Hegel's point of view. And in fact, according to Hegel, they did question it, as becomes obvious in some of their own artistic creations.

As we have seen, Hegel holds on to the central neoclassicist credo that ancient Greek beauty embodies the epitome of all beauty, while at the same time rejecting the idea that Greek beauty can and ought to be emulated by future (modern) artists. According to the argument outlined above, these views ultimately underlie Hegel's worries about the status of art in modernity. But obviously, this connection holds only if it is assumed in addition that for Hegel art is essentially beautiful, or at least aspires to be so, such that art stands or falls with (Greek) beauty. If, in contrast, art could in some way emancipate itself from (Greek) beauty, no worries about its status could be grounded anymore in a more fundamental worry about beauty. In fact, at first sight there would seem to be good reasons for doubting that art is essentially connected with beauty in Hegel's view. After all, Hegel is well known for his tripartite system of the history of art, according to which the period of classical Greek art is preceded by a period of what he calls symbolic art (by which he means art such as that encountered in ancient Persia, India, and Egypt) and succeeded by a period of what he calls romantic art (by which he means primarily Christian medieval art). Whereas Hegel obviously believes that beauty is essential to classical Greek art, one might think that symbolic and romantic art are characterized by fundamentally different traits in his view; yet obviously, both pre- and post-classical works of art qualify as proper works of art from Hegel's point of view. But in fact, matters are not that simple. For Hegel, the essence of symbolic art lies in its striving for a unity of form and content, which, however, it cannot yet accomplish; this unity is only reached with the advent of Greek beauty.<sup>11</sup> Thus it would seem that symbolic art at least satisfies the criterion of striving for beauty, if not yet itself embodying it. How Hegel sees the relation between beauty and post-classical art is a more contested issue. Some present day commentators hold that in post-classical art one can observe a tendency towards the 'emancipation' from beauty on Hegel's account. On this reading, this tendency becomes most obviously manifest in late romantic art, which can therefore be used as a starting point for an account of a Hegelian conception of *modern* art.<sup>12</sup> If this reading is correct, then there is obviously no need to accept the conclusion that the status of art becomes problematic in modernity in Hegel's view. Beauty



may come to an end in modernity, but this has no implications for the fate of art. However, such a reading is not uncontroversial: other commentators hold that art remains indebted to beauty for Hegel even in modernity.<sup>13</sup> But note that even if one accepts the latter claim, one might still reject the conclusion that this renders the status of art in modernity questionable. For one might undertake to argue within a Hegelian account that art can emancipate itself from Greek beauty not by becoming non-beautiful art—i.e. by emancipating itself from beauty altogether—but by becoming beautiful in a non-Greek way. Hegel's analysis of the shortcomings of beauty is first and foremost an analysis of the shortcomings of Greek beauty, or of beauty as understood by the Greeks. And this would seem to invite the question of whether there might not be some other form of beauty—perhaps a distinctively modern one—that is free of the specific flaws of the Greek form. Might not artistic beauty be capable of undergoing historical change from Hegel's point of view? If this was the case, one could escape the conclusion of the argument above, not by cutting the ties between art and beauty altogether, but merely cutting its ties with Greek beauty. Whereas from Hegel's point of view, there may be no point in imitating or recreating Greek beauty in modernity, this need not apply in the same way to other forms of beauty. And so there would be no reason why future art should not continue to be beautiful art.

Obviously, which of these approaches to the above argument will ultimately be successful—which of its premises one ought to accept or reject on which grounds—can only be assessed on the basis of a thorough investigation of Hegel's notion of beauty. Against the background of such an investigation, we will be in a better position to judge what exactly is problematic about Greek beauty in Hegel's view, how he conceives of the relation between art and beauty, and whether he thinks that there may be forms of beauty other than the Greek one. The central aim of this book is to carry out such an investigation into Hegel's notion of beauty. This investigation is guided by the conviction that we need to take very seriously Hegel's fascination with the beauty exemplified in ancient Greek art. Greek art is unsurpassed and exemplary for its beauty in Hegel's view. Accordingly, anyone who wishes to argue that post-classical art can emancipate itself from Greek beauty for Hegel, or even from beauty altogether, will have to face the challenge of showing how art can continue to be of value when no longer living up to the high standards set within Greek art. Put bluntly, the question they must seek to answer is this: what good can art be if it can no longer be as beautiful as ancient Greek art used to be? It is against the background of this question, I want to suggest, that we need to assess Hegel's stance on the status of art in modernity.

In the remainder of the introduction, I want to give a short preview of the central ideas that distinguish the approach pursued in the following chapters.

## THE CLASSICAL CONCEPTION OF BEAUTY

As we have seen, Hegel holds that beauty comes to perfection in ancient Greek art. In fact, behind this view stands a larger vision of the ancient Greek culture. If one looks at Hegel's account in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, it becomes clear that what Hegel calls 'Greek spirit'<sup>14</sup> defines a relatively long historical period, which spans from the archaic age to the end of Hellenistic Greece. The basic characteristics of the Greek culture remain the same throughout this period in Hegel's view. However, the period that he considers particularly important is the period of classical Greece and its democratically governed city states (the *poleis*), most importantly Athens, roughly between 500 and 400 BC. For it is in this period, according to Hegel, that the Greek culture most self-consciously expresses its central values.<sup>15</sup> On Hegel's account, the central value underlying not only Greek art, but Greek politics, religion and ethical thought as well, is beauty. This means that the Greeks conceive of an individual's ethical excellence, a state's political accomplishment and a god's magnificence equally in aesthetic terms.<sup>16</sup> In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel writes:

Such are the qualities of that *Beautiful Individuality*, which constitutes the centre of the Greek character. We must now consider the several radiations which this idea throws out in realizing itself. All issue in works of art, and we may arrange in three heads: the *subjective* work of art, that is, the culture of the man himself;—the *objective* work of art, *i.e.*, the shaping of the world of divinities;—lastly, the *political* work of art—the form of the Constitution, and the relations of the Individuals who compose it.<sup>17</sup>

It is important to note that in Hegel's account this Greek tendency to see beauty as the central value not only in art, but also in religion, ethics and politics is not somehow accidental to their conception of beauty. That is to say, it is not the case that the Greeks defined a conception of an aesthetic value, beauty, and then carried this conception over to other contexts such as politics and religion. If this was the case, one could easily argue that such a move is illegitimate; it would essentially consist in applying an aesthetic form of evaluation to contexts which are not at first sight primarily aesthetic. But in fact, the classical Greek conception of beauty, as Hegel understands it (henceforth simply 'the classical conception of beauty'), is *essentially* both aesthetic and has implications for ethics, politics and religion. To see why this is so, we have to look a bit more closely at how the Greeks understand beauty in Hegel's account. Characteristic of the Greek spirit, Hegel writes, is the idea of an 'Incarnate Spirit (*verkörperter Geist*)'<sup>18</sup> and 'Spiritualized Sense (*vergeistigte Sinnlichkeit*)'.<sup>19</sup> About Greek beauty, he writes: 'In Greek Beauty the Sensuous is only a sign, an expression, an envelope, in which Spirit manifests itself.'<sup>20</sup> Underlying the Greek conception of beauty, then,

is the vision of a unity of spirit on the one hand and of a sensuous, natural body on the other.<sup>21</sup> This unity is such that through it the sensuous body becomes a sign or expression of spirit; it is an expressive unity, one might say. For the Greeks, this expressive unity of spirit and natural, sensuous body becomes manifest in one creature in particular: the human individual.<sup>22</sup> For the human individual is the only creature who partakes in both the spiritual and the natural world, and in whom both sides are inextricably intertwined. This means that for the Greeks, aesthetic perfection—i.e. beauty—is essentially embodied by the human individual.

Furthermore, because beauty for the Greeks consists in a unity of spirit and natural body, the aesthetic excellence embodied by the human individual is at the same time essentially connected to a form of ethical excellence. For the unity of spirit and nature that is constitutive of beauty is at the same time constitutive of a certain ethical stance. One can speak of a unity of spirit and natural body where an individual acts in accord with certain ethical and political principles or norms as a matter of habit and custom. For here one might say that the principles or norms have become her second nature: she does not need to deliberate on whether and why she ought to act in accord with them, but rather does it immediately and without need for reflection. Acting in this way immediately flows from her nature; she does not conceive of the relevant principles or norms as external constraints, but as an expression of who she is. In fact, on Hegel's view ethical excellence consists for the Greeks precisely in such a unity of ethical or political principles and individual human nature. He writes: 'As in Beauty the Natural element—its sensuous coefficient—remains, so also in this customary morality, laws assume the form of a necessity of Nature. The Greeks occupy the middle ground of *Beauty* [ . . . ]'<sup>23</sup> In short, because the Greeks conceive of beauty in terms of a unity of spirit and nature, and because such a unity is essentially embodied by the human individual for them, the Greek notion of beauty in fact gives expression to a comprehensive human ideal with ethical and political dimensions. From the Greeks' point of view, precisely in embodying an aesthetic ideal, the human individual possesses ethical and political excellence, and vice versa.

Note that on this conception, beauty not merely essentially has ethical and political implications, but it is also not tied necessarily to art. On the contrary: beauty is primarily to be found—at least potentially—outside of the context of art, in the living human individual. Now I would suggest that one of Hegel's main reasons for admiring the ancient Greek culture as much as he does is that they were the first to formulate this conception of beauty, or to give expression to this aesthetic vision.<sup>24</sup> That is to say, they were the first to have had the vision of a living aesthetic ideal, of an aesthetic ideal embodied by actual human individuals. Thus when Hegel holds, as we have seen above, that beauty comes to perfection in ancient Greek art, this is grounded in the more general view that the Greeks were the first to conceive and give expression to a comprehensive ideal of beauty revolving around

the human individual. Furthermore, I would suggest that what Hegel praises about the classical conception of beauty is not merely its boldness, its comprehensiveness, or perhaps its historical novelty. Rather, he believes that there is a great deal of truth in it; in fact, the classical conception of beauty expresses *the* true vision of beauty for him. This is because, on the one hand, from his point of view this conception draws on an important insight into the uniquely human potential for bringing about and embodying an expressive unity of spirit and natural body. And on the other hand, the Greek vision of beauty is inspired by the notion that whatever is to be conceived as a proper ideal must be potentially actualized, embodied, lived by actual human individuals. Ideals for Hegel can never be *mere* ideals, indifferent towards and detached from their potential of being actualized.<sup>25</sup> Thus what recommends the classical conception of beauty as truthful from Hegel's point of view is that it straddles art and reality, by giving artistic expression to an aesthetic ideal that is inspired by and refers to the actual human individual.

Many commentators on Hegel's aesthetics will be reluctant to accept the latter claim that Hegel not merely embraces the classical conception of beauty, but furthermore embraces it because it considers the living human individual as the paradigmatic embodiment of beauty. For this claim implies a challenge to what has become somewhat of an orthodox view in the interpretation of Hegel's aesthetics: according to the orthodox view, *only* works of art can be beautiful for Hegel. Beauty is exclusive to art for Hegel, it is held, and in particular the natural world is excluded from the sphere of the beautiful.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, if Hegel embraces the classical conception of beauty as I suggest, then he must hold that there is at least potential for beauty to be found in human nature. In fact, this is what I shall argue explicitly and in great detail in this book, in particular in chapters 1–3. One major part of this argument will be to show—drawing on both Hegel's 'Anthropology' and *Aesthetics*—that from Hegel's point of view the Greeks are right in seeing aesthetic potential in the human being. For Hegel, too, the human being is a living creature—in fact, the only living creature—that possesses the potential to be beautiful. This of course raises the question of how Hegel conceives of the relation between beauty and art—to what extent can we still hold on to the orthodox view that beauty is exclusive to art for Hegel in light of this result? Again, I shall attempt to clarify this relation in the first part of the book. It will become clear here that while there is potential for beauty to be found in the living human being, art nevertheless plays a crucial role in the creation of genuine beauty on Hegel's account.

More generally, the first part of the book is dedicated to bringing out what one might call Hegel's affirmative relation to the classical conception of beauty—the extent to which he embraces this conception. As I shall try to show, from Hegel's point of view, the classical conception of beauty is not merely grounded in a true understanding of the relation between ideal and reality as well as in a perceptive vision of the aesthetic potential of the human being. Furthermore, it also provides the basis for a convincing

conception of the value of beauty and the nature of aesthetic experience. In light of this, one can say that from Hegel's point of view, what he considers as the classical conception of beauty is not merely a historical phenomenon. Rather, he considers it as a true, or even as *the* true conception of beauty.

## BEYOND CLASSICAL BEAUTY?

Does this mean, then, that Hegel wholeheartedly endorses what he considers as the Greek classical conception of beauty? The answer is, I would suggest, that he endorses it as a true conception of beauty. At the same time, he holds that the classical conception of beauty is problematic and ultimately cannot be maintained. But it is problematic not because it fails to live up to Hegel's own standards or criteria of success. Rather, Hegel holds that the classical conception of beauty fails by its *own* standards; or in other words, the classical conception of beauty suffers from an inherent tension. To show this is the aim of the second part of the book, chapters 4–6. Thus, whereas the first part of the book considers Hegel's affirmative relation to the classical conception of beauty, the second part considers his critical stance towards it. But again, it is crucial to note that Hegel's criticism of the classical conception is a form of internal, rather than external critique—as one would indeed expect in light of his famous methodological tenet that all valid critique is immanent critique. This means, on the one hand, that Hegel's criticism consists in revealing the tensions inherent in the classical conception, rather than in judging it as insufficient in light of external standards. Yet on the other hand, Hegel's doctrine of the primacy of immanent critique also has another important aspect: not only does it require that standards of criticism are to be internal to the object of critique itself; it assumes, furthermore, that the object of criticism subjects itself to the critical procedure of its own accord.<sup>27</sup> That is to say, the conception or position under critical scrutiny will sooner or later develop in such a way that its inherent tensions become explicit. In light of such openly revealed inconsistency, the conception or position then needs to be abandoned or at least revised. As I shall try to demonstrate, Hegel perceives precisely such a dynamic of internal tensions becoming explicit in the classical conception of beauty. What this means is that where we find the classical conception of beauty fully articulated in ancient Greek art, we can at the same time see its inherent tensions begin to emerge. Where beauty is brought to perfection, its validity is called into question. For Hegel, the paradigmatic Greek work of art in which beauty is both affirmed and 'deconstructed' in this way is Greek tragedy. Accordingly, tragedy will play a crucial role in my reconstruction of how Hegel expounds the internal 'self-critique' of the classical conception of beauty.<sup>28</sup>

This brings us back to the remark made earlier on, that for Hegel the status of beauty and beautiful art is problematic in modernity not just

because it is incompatible with fundamental modern values. Beauty is not just ‘outdated’ from Hegel’s point of view. Rather, the classical conception of beauty suffers from an inherent tension, which is why it was already problematic when it first came to be articulated in ancient Greek art. Spelling out in detail what this tension consists of will be a central task of the book. Roughly, one might say that one of the great virtues of the classical conception also underlies its greatest vice. The classical conception revolves around the human individual. The unity of spirit and nature that constitutes beauty is embodied by the human individual. This means that to the extent that beauty is propagated as an ideal, it purports to function as a *human* ideal—a conception of what human individuals, ideally, ought to be like. In other words, as mentioned above, it is not accidental to the classical conception of beauty that it functions as a comprehensive human ideal, but essential to it. Precisely in functioning as an aesthetic ideal it also functions as a human ideal. For Hegel, this twofold ambition of the classical ideal ultimately underlies its failure. For in propagating a harmonious unity of spirit and nature, it fails to do justice to one aspect that Hegel takes to be essential to the human spirit: the capacity to negate or withdraw from one’s external, natural manifestation—in short, what Hegel calls subjectivity. Even more generally, one can say that what is problematic about the classical conception of beauty is that it purports to promote an ideal that is both aesthetic and human; whereas in fact, in succeeding as an aesthetic ideal, it cannot succeed as a human ideal, and vice versa.

It is in light of the tension inherent in the classical conception of beauty, furthermore, that one can explain why and how art must progress beyond its classical Greek form from Hegel’s point of view. Because of its inherent tension, the classical conception ultimately must be abandoned as an artistic paradigm and as a normative ideal more generally. On Hegel’s account, the aim of revising or overcoming the classical conception of beauty is one of the main guiding forces of the post-classical history of art. In this sense, post-classical developments in art can be understood as rational, as guided by reason: they embody attempts at reacting appropriately to the deficiencies of classical beauty. It is due to the tension inherent in classical beauty, then, that post-classical art has a history—moreover, has a rational history. To show how, on Hegel’s account, the development of some part of post-classical art can not only be explained but ‘rationalized’ in reference to the classical conception of beauty and its inherent tension is another central aim of the book.

One obvious question at this point is where exactly the history of art moves as it moves beyond classical beauty. This takes us back to the argument outlined above, according to which Hegel’s stance on the status of art in modernity is tied to his neoclassicist convictions. Put roughly, according to this argument, Hegel’s thesis of the end of art (or some close relative of it) follows simply from the combination of three theses: art is essentially beautiful (or aspires to be so); beauty is to be understood in terms of the classical

Greek conception, or at least this conception provides the central point of reference for any conception of beauty; the classical Greek conception of beauty is problematic and ultimately cannot be maintained. If all three theses are accepted, it follows that the status of art becomes problematic. We already saw that one can potentially avoid this argument in various ways: either by denying that beauty is essential to art—such that art can ‘emancipate’ itself from beauty altogether in modernity; or by arguing that from Hegel’s point of view it is possible to conceive of forms of beauty other than the Greek classical one, such that art may potentially continue to be beautiful without falling prey to the deficiencies of Greek classical beauty. These different argumentative strategies will be considered and discussed towards the end of the book, which thus concludes by connecting the preceding discussion of classical Greek beauty with Hegel’s views on the status of art in modernity. The overall structure of the book is thus inspired by the central Hegelian conviction that in order to properly understand the meaning that some phenomenon or concept has for us today, we need to bring into view its (rational) history.

## PLAN OF THE BOOK

As mentioned above, the book roughly falls into two parts. Chapters 1–3 introduce and develop the classical conception of beauty. Chapters 4–6 lay out the tension inherent in the classical conception and trace parts of the development of post-classical art that is fueled by this tension on Hegel’s account. In other words, chapters 1–3 illuminate Hegel’s affirmative stance on the classical conception of beauty, chapters 4–6 illuminate his critical stance. This is only a rough distinction, though, for as will become apparent, it is not possible to expound the classical conception of beauty as Hegel understands it without also already bringing into view its problematic implications.

As we have seen, the classical conception of beauty is for Hegel not merely a historical phenomenon; rather, it also possesses a great deal of truth in his view. That is to say, Hegel in fact embraces it as a true conception of beauty. In light of this, it is appropriate to refer to the classical conception of beauty as Hegel’s own, or simply as the Hegelian conception of beauty (bearing in mind, however, the possibility that Hegel’s position may leave room for envisaging other forms of beauty over and above the classical one). I will thus introduce and discuss the classical conception of beauty in chapters 1–3 simply as Hegel’s own conception of beauty, without flagging explicitly that it also has a particular place in history for him. This approach is also justified by the fact that when Hegel discusses and develops the classical conception of beauty in the *Lectures on Aesthetics* as well as in his *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, he often does so by speaking of beauty *simpliciter*, rather than of classical beauty or Greek beauty more narrowly.



That this Hegelian conception of beauty nevertheless bears a close relation to the ancient Greek culture will become more apparent in chapter 4, where I discuss how it is concretely exemplified in works of Greek art.

Central to the classical conception is the idea that beauty consists in a unity of spirit and nature that is embodied by the human individual. If the classical conception is now introduced as Hegel's own conception of beauty, it is bound to collide with the orthodox view that, for Hegel, beauty is exclusive to art. According to the classical conception, in contrast, the paradigmatic instance of beauty is the actual human individual. Since the view that beauty is exclusive to art for Hegel is such a deeply entrenched tenet among commentators on Hegel's aesthetics, it requires a carefully chosen strategy to argue against it. The argument developed in chapters 1–3 is designed so as to tackle this predominant conviction in three argumentative steps. First, I provide evidence that the contrary of the predominant view may be true, that is, that the paradigmatic instance of a beautiful object for Hegel is not the work of art, but the human individual. Second, I address head-on the reasons that are adduced by commentators in support of the predominant view. Third, I show that the opposition between the predominant view and the interpretation of Hegel presented here is not as fundamental as it may seem at first sight.

Chapter 1 is dedicated to step one of the argument. Here I juxtapose Hegel's *Aesthetics* with sections from his 'Anthropology' in order to suggest that the latter can be read as a complement to the former: in the 'Anthropology', Hegel provides a foundation for the claim that the human individual possesses the potential to be beautiful, which is merely alluded to in the *Aesthetics*. This offers a first motivation for accepting that beauty may be found outside of the sphere of art in the living human being for Hegel. Chapter 1 also offers a detailed exposition of how to understand the expressive unity of human spirit and nature that is constitutive of beauty according to the classical conception. In chapter 2, proceeding to step two of the argument, I discuss some of the most influential arguments that have been offered by commentators in favor of the view that beauty is exclusive to art for Hegel. I show that they no longer appear compelling in light of the results reached in chapter 1. I also introduce an interpretation of how Hegel understands the relation between human beauty and beauty in art. This suggestion is further elaborated in chapter 3, which thereby completes the third step of the argument. On this interpretation, the human individual functions as the paradigmatic and primary exemplification of beauty for Hegel; but at the same time, art is in a certain sense essential to the creation of genuine beauty. Chapter 3 also demonstrates that the classical conception of beauty provides the basis for a convincing account of the value of beauty and of the nature of aesthetic experience.

Chapter 4 continues the systematic discussion of the classical conception of beauty by demonstrating that it allows for an attractive expansion of our common sense understanding of beauty, in particular of human beauty: in



light of the classical conception, we can judge not merely human figures, but human characters as beautiful. This, in turn, dovetails nicely with certain intuitions we have about the assessment of human character. At the same time, chapter 4 begins to bring into view how the classical conception of beauty is embedded in the ancient Greek culture in Hegel's account, by discussing concrete examples of it in Greek works of art. This also provides the starting point for a detailed discussion of the tension inherent in the classical conception of beauty.

Chapters 5–6 are dedicated to tracing how Hegel conceives of the post-classical history of beauty and art. Chapter 5 explains why the phenomenon of pain—understood as the pain of inner division—emerges as a principle subject matter in art once the shortcomings of the classical conception have been brought into view. Where pain occurs, the undisrupted unity of spirit and nature that is constitutive of classical beauty has been severed; at the same time, this opens up a new dimension of subjectivity from which the classically beautiful individual is excluded. Thus, in addressing the subject of pain, art can be seen with Hegel as moving beyond classical beauty, thereby leaving behind the inner tension associated with it. The chapter looks at treatments of pain both in Greek tragedy and in the post-classical form of art that Hegel calls romantic art. Chapter 6 addresses the question of whether one ought to conclude from the preceding discussion that beauty becomes altogether a thing of the past from Hegel's point of view, and what implications this would have for the status of art in modernity. I review different interpretations of Hegel's stance on beauty and art in modernity. According to one—which is popular among present day commentators—art should be seen as emancipating itself altogether from beauty in modernity within a Hegelian account. According to another approach, it is possible to conceive within a Hegelian account of an alternative form of beauty over and above the classical one, which is no longer subject to the deficiencies of the latter. I conclude without ultimately affirming either one of these interpretive options, leaving it to the reader to decide which one they find most promising.

## TEXTUAL SOURCES

Scholars working on Hegel's aesthetics are in a much more fortunate position today than twenty years ago. Thanks to Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert's editorial work, what used to be the standard version of Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics* has now been complemented by a number of student transcripts of Hegel's lectures. The standard edition, which was put together by Hegel's student Hotho, compiles the lecture course that Hegel held several times in different years in Berlin into one unified volume. The student transcripts, in contrast, which derive from different lecture courses, make it possible to pursue the development of Hegel's thoughts throughout the years. Furthermore,

as Gethmann-Siefert has demonstrated repeatedly, the transcripts provide a more reliable pathway to Hegel's own thoughts than the Hotho edition, which was apparently heavily amended by Hotho himself. In my discussion, I give priority to the student transcripts over the Hotho edition wherever possible.<sup>29</sup> But I also avoid relying on unauthorized textual sources in a different way. An important foundation of my interpretation derives from Hegel's 1830 work, *Enzyklopädie der Philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* [Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences], in particular from his discussion of beauty in the section on Absolute Spirit, as well as his discussion of the relation between human body and soul that forms part of the section on Subjective Spirit. I take Hegel's definition of beauty, as well as his views regarding the aesthetic potential of the human being mainly from the *Encyclopedia*, and use the *Aesthetics* here only in order to render support to lines of thought already indicated in the *Encyclopedia*.

## NOTES

1. ÄT, 9/AT, 1.
2. See for instance Gethmann-Siefert 1992, Gethmann-Siefert 1996, Houlgate 1997, James 2009, Pippin 2005, Pippin 2008, Rutter 2010.
3. Aesth. 1823, 179
4. Kuhn 1966. Kuhn offers one of the most comprehensive, subtle and convincing accounts of Hegel's relation to German neoclassicism available in the literature.
5. Kuhn 1966, 102.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. For a dissenting view, see Baur 1997. Baur argues that Winckelmann was well aware of the difficulties connected with the notion that we ought to emulate the Greeks. These difficulties are reflected in the fact that Winckelmann's famous statement concerning the imitation of Greek art—'The only way for us to become great or, if this be possible, inimitable, is to imitate the Greeks' (Gedanken, 29–30/Reflections, 5)—states a paradox, Baur argues.
9. See for instance Henrich 1985, 205; see also Pippin 2008 and Rutter 2010 for versions of this claim. Likewise, Kuhn speaks at one point of the 'incompatibility' between the Greek model and modernity that emerges in Hegel's account (see Kuhn 1966, 106).
10. I consider the reasons why this interpretation is not satisfying in the light of Hegel's own methodological commitments in chapter 6.
11. See for instance Enz., § 561.
12. See Pippin 2008 and Rutter 2010 for versions of this reading.
13. See for instance Gethmann-Siefert 1992, Gethmann-Siefert 1996, Houlgate 1997.
14. VPG, 293/LPH, 248.
15. At the same time, this period of the Greek democratic *poleis* is also a period of transition according to Hegel, since it is precisely at this moment of confident self-assertion and self-recognition that the Greek culture becomes aware of a tension inherent in its own ethical thought, which makes it necessary to reconsider some of its central notions.
16. VPG, 277/LPH 234 f.

17. VPG, 295/LPH, 250.
18. VPG, 275/LPH, 233.
19. Ibid.
20. VPG, 294/LPH, 249.
21. See also VPG, 293/LPH, 248 f.
22. Ibid.
23. VPG, 308/LPH 261 f.
24. This is contrary to Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert's interpretation (Gethmann-Siefert, 1984). Gethmann-Siefert seems to hold that what Hegel finds admirable in ancient Greek art (and in general about the Greek culture) is not at all the *aesthetic* vision it gives expression to. Rather, in her view he is merely fascinated by the fact that Greek art purports to promote a normative ethical and political ideal, and thus to give expression to the central (ethical and political) values endorsed by the Greek culture—in short, that it possesses a vital cultural function. This cultural function of Greek art is independent of and comes in addition to the fact that it exemplifies an aesthetic vision. Gethmann-Siefert goes so far as to claim that when Hegel praises the beauty of ancient Greek art, what he means by 'beauty' here is simply something like cultural impact (Gethmann-Siefert 1984, 238). This has important implications for her understanding of Hegel's relation to neoclassicism. She holds that Hegel is a neoclassicist merely in the sense that he admires the major cultural impact that art used to have in the ancient Greek culture, and furthermore even believes that in principle art could reassume this function in modernity (given that it can free itself from its dedication to an aesthetic ideal). In short, in her view, Hegel does not see any truth in the *aesthetic* vision of the Greeks (in this sense, his position is in her view radically different from typical varieties of neoclassicism, such as for instance Winckelmann's); he merely finds worth preserving their idea that art ought to have some cultural impact.
25. See for instance § 1 of PhR, where Hegel states that for him an 'idea' is not merely a concept, but something like an actualized concept; for his definition of 'idea', see also Enz., § 213. I discuss Hegel's notion of the idea and its relation to the (aesthetic) ideal more explicitly in chapter 2.
26. See my detailed discussion of different versions of the orthodox view in chapter 2.
27. See Phän, § 85 for a famous formulation of this tenet.
28. One might object here that it is somewhat odd for Hegel to hold that an aesthetic phenomenon such as beauty can be subjected (or even subject *itself*) to rational criticism just like a philosophical, theoretical conception, and furthermore that such criticism may be carried out in the medium of art. Another way of raising the same worry is to say that there is something odd in simply equating the *phenomenon* of beauty as it is exemplified in Greek art with a supposed *conception* of Greek beauty. Perhaps this is indeed odd. But the idea that art must be conceived of as a phenomenon that is rational (or, as Hegel would put it, spiritual) in the sense that it subjects itself to rational criticism is one of Hegel's major and most original contributions to aesthetics. Of course, that art and its history follows such a rational logic of development cannot simply be assumed, but needs to be demonstrated. In this book I try to contribute to showing what such a demonstration looks like from Hegel's point of view.
29. Since the transcripts have not yet been translated into English, I provide my own translation where I cite passages in the main text; in the footnotes, I cite in German.

# 1 The Anthropological Roots of Beauty

Most commentators on Hegel's aesthetics today hold that for Hegel, beauty is essentially an artistic phenomenon, and therefore, our analysis of Hegel's notion of beauty has to begin with his theory of the artwork. However, the following observation should give us pause. When Hegel wishes to illustrate, in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, what beauty consists of, he always refers to the same image: the living human figure, whose inner soul or spirit becomes visible in the body. In a famous passage in the *Aesthetics*,<sup>1</sup> for instance, Hegel cites the human eye as an example of an object in which beauty can be found.<sup>2</sup> When we look into the eye of a living human being, we see not just the eye, but the soul that shows itself in it—the eye is a sign of the inner soul. Hegel mentions further the human face and figure, human gestures and motions, speech and actions as the kinds of things that can be beautiful if they make a human individual's soul appear through them. If for Hegel beauty is essentially an artistic phenomenon, then such references cannot be taken literally. Rather, they will have to be understood in the spirit of an analogy or metaphor, stating that the beautiful artwork conveys its meaning *like* the human eye expresses the soul, or *as if* it was a human eye expressing the soul. However, I want to examine in the following whether we ought not to understand such references to the human figure in Hegel's *Aesthetics* in a more literal sense and consider the possibility that the actual living human figure does in fact have significant aesthetic potential in Hegel's view. To do so, I want to carry out the experiment of reading the *Aesthetics* alongside specific sections from Hegel's 'Anthropology' that forms the first part of his 'Philosophy of Subjective Spirit' in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*. In these sections, Hegel discusses the relation between body and soul that he takes to be peculiar to human beings, in particular the capacity of the human soul to become manifest or expressed in the body. The hypothesis pursued in the following is that these sections can be read as a complement to the allusions Hegel makes in the *Aesthetics* to the aesthetic potential of the human being. The idea that humans possess the capacity to be beautiful in virtue of giving expression to their inner soul in their body, which is merely being alluded to in the *Aesthetics*, is given a firmer foundation and spelled out in detail in the 'Anthropology'. As I hope to demonstrate both in

the present and in following chapters, this experiment turns out to be fruitful: Hegel's discussion of the relation between human soul and body turns out to have significant implications for Hegel's assessment of the aesthetic potential of the human individual.

As sketched in the introduction, the discussion in the present chapter constitutes the first step of an argument aimed at refuting the predominant view that beauty is exclusive to art in Hegel's view. In this first step, by discussing Hegel's account of the aesthetic potential of the human being, I offer evidence that there may be beauty to be found outside of the sphere of art from Hegel's point of view. In other words, I provide reasons for believing that objects other than artworks—more specifically, human beings—can be beautiful for Hegel. But the argument will not be complete until the following two steps have been taken as well—that is, until the reasons adduced by commentators for holding the predominant view have been undermined, and potentially lingering worries have been dispelled. These further argumentative steps will be taken in the following chapters. Thus in the present chapter we are only beginning to embark on an argument that eventually is meant to establish that it is not the work of art, but rather the living human individual that constitutes the primary and paradigmatic instance of a beautiful object for Hegel.

## THE AESTHETIC POTENTIAL OF THE HUMAN INDIVIDUAL

### Humans and Animals in the 'Lectures on Aesthetics'

In order to approach the question of whether the human individual might have genuine aesthetic potential in Hegel's view, one has to begin by considering what distinguishes the human living organism from other organisms in this respect. In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel states that beauty is to be found in the realm of living, organic creatures,<sup>3</sup> but he emphasizes that not every kind of living creature has the potential to be beautiful. Following the structure of Hegel's argument, we will therefore begin with his discussion of the animal organism in the *Aesthetics*, and then work our way up until we have reached what constitutes the aesthetic pinnacle in the realm of living organisms for Hegel, the human individual.

The existence of living natural organisms constitutes for Hegel one of the most readily accessible and intuitively convincing corroborations for his idealist philosophy—in the *Aesthetics*, he even calls the existence of such organisms an 'objective idealism', that is, an idealism that is openly perceptible in an object before our eyes.<sup>4</sup> The animal organism, for Hegel, deserves to be called a subject, because whereas it is spread out in a manifold of parts, it nevertheless maintains a unity within these parts. This unity manifests itself both objectively and subjectively. Objectively, because the members of an organism can function and maintain their identity only as members of the

organism, in contrast to, say, parts of an artifact. The bricks that make up a wall, for instance, remain what they are when the wall is taken apart. An animal's eye or tail, in contrast, loses its ability to move and function when severed from the body, as well as losing its shape and color, and everything else that constitutes its identity. The unity of the living organism's parts is also subjectively manifest in the organism's sensations. The organism has sensations in almost every single one of its many spatially dispersed parts, and yet it is one identical subject that receives and processes this perceptual information; in the multiplicity of its sensations, the animal organism is always 'reflected into itself'.<sup>5</sup> This self-reflective unity of the organism is what Hegel calls the organism's 'soul', its 'inner' or its 'concept'.<sup>6</sup> It is a soul that is distinct from its outer body insofar as it is distinct from the immediate, particular and separate existence of the organism's parts, yet at the same time it is present in them as it senses itself in all of them. The living organism therefore provides immediately perceptible evidence for Hegel's thesis that the concept has objective reality or, as he puts it in one of his most famous statements, that the substance is at the same time subject.<sup>7</sup>

Hegel makes it clear in the *Aesthetics* that he considers the unity and subjectivity of the living animal organism as a kind of proto-aesthetic phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> The animal organism, he argues, is aesthetically superior to vegetal nature and non-living natural objects and structures.<sup>9</sup> It is true that in vegetal nature and non-living objects and structures, we can find both regularity and law-likeness. Regularity consists in a repetition of the same shape, as for instance in the form of a cube, where all the sides have the same size, and all the edges have the same length. Law-likeness, in contrast to regularity, can encompass differences in shape. The shape of an egg, for instance, is law-like without being regular, for the two sides of the egg (that is, the upper and the lower side) are different. Both in regular and in law-like natural structures, we have something like a unity of a general rule or law and an objective, natural particular: the natural particular exemplifies the general rule or law. This explains why, Hegel argues, we may be tempted to ascribe a certain degree of aesthetic excellence to such structures. But what Hegel finds wanting about regular and law-like nature from an aesthetic point of view is the lack of an intrinsic connection between the general rule or law and the natural particular—or, in short, a lack of subjectivity: the general norm or law does not manifest *itself* or express *itself* in the natural particular.<sup>10</sup>

But while being aesthetically superior to non-living and vegetal nature in virtue of its subjectivity, the animal organism is nevertheless inferior in aesthetic respect to the human being. Hegel here does not make his line of argument fully explicit, but it seems to be grounded in the premise that what is necessary in order for a living subject to be aesthetically excellent—that is, ultimately, to be beautiful—is that it possesses the capacity to make its inner soul wholly manifest in its external body. But the animal organism lacks this capacity, and this is the reason why it is aesthetically deficient, in contrast

to the human individual. Hegel offers several arguments and considerations to support this point, not all of which are equally relevant and convincing.<sup>11</sup> Two considerations, however, are worth noting. One is that the individual animal organism is often barred from manifesting freely its subjective unity in its individual parts because it is determined and inhibited in different ways by the world in which it lives. Thus hostile climatic conditions, lack of food, drought or natural catastrophes can deform or disfigure the organism such that it ends up indicating the condition of its environment, rather than functioning as a sign or manifestation of its inner unity and subjectivity. More importantly even, because of its peculiar constitution, the animal organism can *necessarily* only be an imperfect expression of its subjectivity. The argument Hegel gives in the *Aesthetics* to support this claim is the following. The animal body is covered with hair, shell, bone, scales or feathers, in short, with lifeless substances that hide, rather than manifest the animal's subjectivity—its ability to sense itself in its body parts—since they make its body parts appear as if they belonged to the realm of inorganic or vegetal nature. Thus, the subjectivity of the animal organism does not achieve an external, openly perceptible existence, but remains partly 'inward'. Hegel proceeds by contrasting this with the human body, which, he writes, manifests its subjectivity on its entire surface, which is covered with naked skin through which the pulsating heart becomes visible, rather than with lifeless coverings.<sup>12</sup>

Taken by itself, this argument is hardly convincing. It is not clear why one form of organic matter—skin—should be more apt to manifest subjectivity than another; furthermore, some parts of the human body are covered with hair; large parts are usually covered with clothes; and some animals are naked. A more plausible account of what Hegel has in mind can be gained, I suggest, by considering his discussion of the relation between human body and soul, which forms part of his 'Anthropology', the first part of his 'Philosophy of Subjective Spirit'. The upshot of this discussion, as we shall see, is that the human individual accomplishes a unity of inner soul and outer body that is uniquely human—animals cannot accomplish such a unity of inner and outer. Furthermore, this unity of inner and outer has aesthetic implications, as it is in virtue of their capacity to accomplish such unity that human individuals can overcome the aesthetic shortcoming of the animal organism just discussed. The central concept that Hegel draws on in this context is the notion of *habit*.<sup>13</sup> In order to appreciate why it is relevant in the context of Hegel's aesthetic theory, we need to consider in some detail his notion of habit as he develops it in the 'Anthropology'.

### The Aesthetic Relevance of Habit

A habit, one might think, is simply a pattern of regular behavior, which can be observed in animals as well as in human beings. A herd of animals, for instance, may form the habit of always attending the same watering



hole at the same time of the day in order to drink. However, Hegel is particularly interested in those habits that are acquired deliberately or intentionally—which are ‘posited’, as he puts it<sup>14</sup>—and that are therefore exclusive to human beings in his view. Human beings can, for instance, deliberately form the habit of having regular meals at certain times in the day, rather than eating whenever they feel the sensation of hunger. In the long run, the sensation of hunger will then begin to occur regularly as well, in accord with the established meal times. More generally, in order to form a habit, a human individual has to deliberately repeat the same routine of action, or the same attitude towards certain sensations, many times: human habits are acquired through *repetition* and *training* to which an individual deliberately subjects herself.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it is crucial to note that the acquisition even of human habits can never be reduced to a subject’s deliberate activity. One can deliberately repeat the same routine of action many times, or expose oneself repeatedly to the same sensation, but this in itself will not be sufficient for the acquisition of a habit. In order for a habit to form itself, one’s body has to ‘respond’ to this routine of repetition in the right way. For instance, if one repeats the same routine of action many times, this will in some cases lead to the onset of a ‘mechanism’:<sup>16</sup> at some point, one begins to carry out the course of action mechanically, that is, in the absence of preceding deliberation and reflection. Likewise, if one is repeatedly exposed—or exposes oneself deliberately—to the same sensation, one will at some point become ‘hardened’<sup>17</sup> against the sensation in question, that is, one will cease to sense it as strongly as before. However, whether the onset of the relevant mechanism or the effect of hardening does in fact occur is not under the subject’s immediate control. Rather, this is an effect with regard to which she is passive. She is here dependent on her body reacting in an appropriate way to her deliberate attempts at formation.

From Hegel’s point of view, this shows that the successful acquisition of a habit involves essentially both our spiritual and our natural side. For Hegel, the essence of spirit is freedom.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, this freedom is to be conceived of in terms of a liberation from nature. Thus he writes in a fragment on the ‘Philosophy of Spirit’: ‘What spirit *is*, is just this movement of liberating itself from nature’.<sup>19</sup> Here one must pay attention to Hegel’s precise formulation: spirit is not, on this account, a subject that engages in a movement, but it is the movement itself. This movement is, Hegel writes, a teleological one: ‘[E]very *determinacy* in which [spirit] presents itself is a moment of the development and, in its continuing determination, a step forward towards its *goal*, namely, to make itself into, and to become *for itself*, what it is *in itself*’.<sup>20</sup> The goal of the process, Hegel states, is something like self-consciousness or self-understanding: that what spirit is ‘in itself’ becomes ‘for itself’. Against this background, one can say that a process or movement can be more or less ‘spiritual’ depending on the degree of self-consciousness or self-knowledge it involves. According to Hegel, the capacity for deliberate, intentional action—in short, the *will*—involves



a high degree of self-consciousness in that it involves complex cognitive achievements such as the capacity for thought and the consciousness of oneself as universal subject or 'I'.<sup>21</sup> Thus, to the extent that the acquisition of habit involves deliberate, intentional action—the deliberate, intentional repetition of the same course of action—it qualifies as a spiritual process. At the same time, to the extent that the acquisition of habit involves processes that are beyond the subject's intentional, deliberate control, such as the mechanization of bodily processes or the hardening against sensation, it qualifies as a natural process. Accordingly, the process of the acquisition of habits is partly natural, partly spiritual.

However, putting it this way is not yet quite accurate. Hegel's view is not just that when human individuals acquire habits, they exercise *on the one hand* their spiritual side and *on the other hand* their natural side; he does not have in mind the combination of two heterogeneous elements. Rather, he holds that where human habits are acquired, a *unity* of spirit and nature manifests itself. That is to say, we are here presented with a process in which our spiritual and our natural sides are joined together or unified in one overall movement; moreover, this overall movement qualifies as a spiritual one. In other words, the acquisition of habits is for Hegel a spiritual process in which natural processes play an essential role. To see why this is the case, we need to look at one example of the acquisition of habits more closely. Let us consider Hegel's example of the acquisition of bodily skill.<sup>22</sup>

We can here draw on an example Hegel himself discusses at various places, the example of the skill of writing. The acquisition of writing skill requires the deliberate repetition of the same movements many times. Furthermore, human individuals do not possess something like an instinct for writing. Writing is a cultural technique, invented by humans, and typically employed for the pursuit of cognitively complex purposes such as communication and memorization. It is in this twofold sense that the acquisition of the skill of writing is an exercise of human freedom. On the other hand, to acquire the skill of writing means to develop certain mechanisms of movement. A skilled writer is characterized by the fact that when she wishes to write a word or sentence, she only has to pursue the overall purpose of writing the word or sentence, and her fingers will carry out the relevant movements mechanically, without her having to think about how exactly to move her fingers. This aspect of the possession of skill also has a phenomenological side. We can illustrate this in light of the example of writing. Let us suppose a subject learns to write the capital printed letter 'A'. Someone demonstrates to her how to write a capital 'A' in printed letters, instructing her to draw three lines, of different lengths and at different angles. She has never performed this sequence of movements before. As she now tries to follow the demonstration, she deliberately performs three different bodily movements, making an individual effort for each one, thereby drawing three different lines. As a result, the three lines she has drawn end up constituting the capital letter 'A'. What is crucial about this process as described here is

that as unpracticed writer, she writes an 'A' by deliberately performing certain bodily movements. One might also say that the bodily movements she performs are in her perception distinct from the overall act of writing an 'A'; they are the actions she deliberately performs *in order to* write an 'A'. In this sense, she writes an 'A' by deliberately doing something else (more specifically, by performing three individual bodily actions). In contrast, once she has acquired the skill of writing 'A's, her fingers mechanically perform the relevant movements. That is to say, she no longer has to deliberate on how to 'mediate' between her overall purpose of writing an 'A' and the particular bodily movements this requires. This also means that the skilled and the unskilled writer would give completely different reports of their respective performances. When asked what she is doing, the unskilled writer would describe the particular movements she is performing with her fingers. In contrast, the skilled writer would simply report 'I'm writing an "A"'. She may not even be able to describe anymore the exact particular movements of her fingers: the only account she can give of what she does is that she is writing an 'A'.<sup>23</sup> For her, to perform these movements simply *is* to write an 'A'. One could say that in the case of the skilled writer, the pursuit of the purpose of writing has become immediately embodied.<sup>24</sup>

Thus the phenomenology of skillful bodily action differs in one essential respect from the phenomenology of non-skilled bodily action. By acquiring a bodily skill, a subject comes to perceive of her bodily movements as infused with, or as immediate embodiments of, the overall purposes she pursues, such as the purpose of writing. From her point of view, her particular bodily movements are no longer distinct from the pursuit of the overall purpose, to which they stand in an instrumental relation, but immediately identical with it. The pursuit of her complex, free purposes is immediately embodied.

Thus through acquiring a skill, a subject transforms her body into something that is no longer opposed to her subjective, free purposes, but immediately in accord with them. Through acquiring a skill, one is therefore liberated from the body *as* something that is opposed to one's subjective purposes. Obviously, if one speaks of liberation here, this is to be understood in a special sense; in this sense, to be liberated from nature is not to 'get rid' of it, but rather to transform it in such a way that it becomes more 'spiritualized', moves closer to spirit's *telos* of self-consciousness and self-understanding. However, this is in accord with the well-known Hegelian view that to be free means to integrate and appropriate 'otherness', rather than to get rid of it altogether, to suppress and negate it.<sup>25</sup> What is crucial to note is that in this overall movement towards liberation constituted by the acquisition of skill, both natural processes (such as the onset of a certain bodily mechanism) and spiritual processes (that is, deliberate, self-conscious, intentional activity) play an essential role. Unless the relevant bodily mechanism has been developed, the skill has not been acquired; at the same time, in order to acquire the skill, the relevant bodily movements have

to be repeated deliberately many times. And yet, both of these processes are unified in *one* overall movement aimed at the liberation from nature in the sense indicated above; both natural and spiritual processes form constitutive parts of this overall movement.

In light of the phenomenon of the acquisition of habit, we can therefore understand why Hegel refers to the subject matter of his 'Anthropology' as 'natural spirit',<sup>26</sup> a term he uses synonymously with 'the soul'. The acquisition of habit—including skills—is a spiritual process, as it is aimed at the liberation from nature in the sense explained above. At the same time, this process is running partly in a natural way, as processes that can be qualified as natural form a constitutive part of it. For this reason, the phenomenon of habit constitutes a paradigmatic instance of what Hegel calls natural spirit or the soul: a unity of spiritual and natural processes.

In fact, when Hegel describes the state of the human individual once it has acquired habits, he refers to it as the *actual* soul:

The soul, when its bodiliness has been thoroughly trained and made its own, becomes an *individual* subject for itself; and bodiliness is thus the *externality* as a predicate, in which the subject is related only to itself. This externality represents not itself, but the soul, of which it is the *sign*. As this identity of the inner with the outer, the outer being subjugated to the inner, the soul is *actual*; in its bodiliness it has its free shape, in which it feels *itself* and makes *itself* felt, and which, as the soul's work of art, has *human*, pathognomic and physiognomic, expression.<sup>27</sup>

This quotation suggests that when Hegel speaks of the soul being *actual*, this has something to do with the fact that the real, actual nature of the soul becomes apparent or visible, or that the soul's real nature is being expressed: he speaks of a 'sign' of the soul, and writes that the soul 'feels itself and makes itself felt'. We have already touched on this aspect by discussing the phenomenology of the acquisition of skill. In her skilled, 'thoroughly trained' body, the subject herself comes to perceive a unity of subjective, free purposes and natural body. From her point of view, her body has been transformed from something 'merely' natural, something that is opposed to her subjective, free purposes, into something that immediately embodies them. In the present quotation, Hegel refers to the two opposite kinds of processes involved in the acquisition of habit—deliberate, intentional activity on the one hand, natural processes such as mechanization on the other—as the 'inner' on the one hand and the 'outer' on the other. This may indicate that from his point of view it would not be entirely correct to refer to them as 'spiritual' on the one hand and 'natural' on the other, because natural spirit or the soul consists in a unity of both elements. The spiritual is thus ultimately not something that is opposed to the natural but that includes it. Insofar as they are opposed to each other, one may instead refer to them as 'inner' on the one and 'outer' on the other hand. Accordingly, Hegel refers

to the actual soul as an 'identity' of inner and outer. It is precisely such an identity that becomes manifest or is given expression in the thoroughly trained body.

We need to dwell a little further on what exactly is being expressed here and how. In this way, we will also begin to bring into view the aesthetic relevance of habit. To begin with, the above quotation suggests that for Hegel, in the thoroughly trained and skilled body the soul becomes manifest not only from the subject's own point of view, but for others as well. He uses a variety of expressions to indicate this: when the soul becomes actual, he writes, externality becomes a *sign* of the inner; externality *represents* not itself but the soul; the soul not only feels itself, but makes itself felt; externality has (pathognomic and physiognomic) expression; and, most strikingly, externality is an *artwork* of the soul. It is crucial to pay attention to what precisely Hegel means by externality here. Externality is not simply the natural body. Rather, it is the thoroughly trained and appropriated body, that is, the body as involved for instance in skillful action. In this skillfully moving body, the inner and the outer are unified in the sense explained above. This body, moreover, assumes an expressive quality on Hegel's account: it becomes a 'sign', it 'represents' something. Now when we usually think of an external, natural body as expressing something, then what the body gives expression to is conceived in terms of an inner, mental state such as an emotion or mood. When tears begin to fall, sadness is being expressed, for instance. In such cases, the inner mental state is conceived of as something distinct from the outer body. In being expressed, this distinct inner entity is then being transferred to the outer body or 'externalized'—expression is understood in terms of externalization, in short. But this kind of relation of an external expression and an inner that is being expressed is fundamentally different from the relation Hegel has in mind in the case of the actual soul. Here we are not confronted with an inner distinct from the outer and externalized only as it is being expressed. Rather, what is being 'expressed' is already a unity of inner and outer. This is why the term expression as such may be misleading in this case, as it suggests a movement from the inside to the outside. In the case of the actual soul, this movement is already completed, as it were; inner and outer, the spiritual and the natural element, are unified in the overall movement of the acquisition of habit, and it is this unity to which expression is given. This is why in this case, one should perhaps rather say that this unity becomes manifest, rather than being expressed. To speak of manifestation here is supposed to indicate that we have overcome the duality characteristic of the ordinary relation of expression, where inner and outer are opposed to each other. Where we see an actual soul, we do not see an inner expressing itself in an outer, but a unity of inner and outer manifesting itself. Thus, in contrast to the relation of expression, what becomes manifest is not something other than the manifestation itself. Rather, the manifestation manifests itself—it is essentially self-manifestation. This is, in fact, Hegel's own terminology. It is one

of the central characteristics of spirit in general, Hegel writes, that it *manifests* itself—where manifestation is explicitly to be distinguished from the ordinary kind of expressive relation where one distinct entity gets expressed in another, or something is being expressed by something else. In contrast, in the case of manifestation, it is the movement of manifestation itself that becomes manifest.<sup>28</sup> Hegel writes:

Therefore the determinacy of spirit is *manifestation*. The spirit is not some one determinacy or content whose expression or externality is only a form distinct from the spirit itself. Hence it does not reveal *something*; its determinacy and content is this very revelation.<sup>29</sup>

Applying this to the present case of the actual soul, this means that when the thoroughly trained body is to be conceived of as a sign, it is a peculiar kind of sign: this is not a sign that signifies something else over and above itself. As actual soul, the soul consists in an identity of inner and outer that manifests nothing but itself. One can therefore say that the actual soul is a self-signifying sign. Here, the sign and what is being signified are not two distinct entities. Rather, what is signified is the unity of the outer sign and the inner content it expresses; what is signified is signification itself. We will come back to the peculiarity of this sign when compared with other forms of signification in the final section of this chapter.

The identity of inner and outer that is accomplished in the actual soul is for Hegel decisively different from the inner-outer relation characteristic of non-human animals. In the actual soul, we are presented with a unity of what are originally opposites: the inner and the outer, or what we earlier called the spiritual and the natural side. These are originally opposed not merely in the sense that one consists in deliberate, intentional activity, and the other consists in processes beyond the subject's control. Furthermore, the human subject can conceive purposes that are non-natural in the sense that they are not in any case given to us by instinct, such as the cultural practice of writing (one can also think for instance of ethical purposes here). The fact that the pursuit of these purposes is not part of the natural repertoire of the human individual makes it necessary for the human individual to acquire skills and habits in the first place: skills and habits are 'second nature', as Hegel puts it, drawing on an Aristotelian expression.<sup>30</sup> For through the acquisition of skills and habits, these initially non-natural purposes become, as it were, integrated with the human natural body: the body begins to pursue them mechanically, thereby following a quasi-instinctive, quasi-natural necessity. In contrast, in Hegel's view, non-human animals have a kind of immediate, unproblematic relation to their body. Their bodies follow their *instincts*, and immediately fulfill those tasks and functions that are necessary for the animal to survive. Thus the animal body does not need to be shaped so as to pursue the purposes of the subject; it is immediately 'tuned' to carry them out smoothly and efficiently. Hegel writes:

Whereas in animals the body, in obedience to their instinct, immediately accomplishes everything made necessary by the Idea of the animal, man, in contrast, has first to make himself master of his body through his own activity. At the beginning, the human soul pervades its physical body only in a quite *indeterminately universal* way. For this pervasion to become a *determinate* pervasion, *training* (*Bildung*) is required.<sup>31</sup>

The human being, in contrast to the non-human animal, has to *make* herself master of her body, rather than mastering it immediately.

This also means that, in the case of the human subject, it is more appropriate to speak of an *inner* soul, or rather of an inner element of the soul, than in the case of the animal. The human individual possesses an inner, spiritual element that stands in opposition to the external body, or with regard to which the body presents itself as an instance of external, natural immediacy that first has to be appropriated. There is no such duality in the animal case, as the animal lacks a spiritual, inner side that stands in opposition to its natural body. On the other hand, in the human case the duality is not absolute, as both elements conjoin in one overall movement of liberation in which the spiritual and the natural side of the individual are unified. Accordingly, only in the human case do we find an identity of what are initially opposites, an identity of inner and outer.

With this in mind, we can return to the contrast that holds in aesthetic respect between the human and the animal body from Hegel's point of view. As shown above, the major aesthetic shortcoming of the animal organism consists for Hegel in the fact that the animal lacks the capacity to make its inner soul fully manifest in its external body. We can now describe this shortcoming in more precise terms. Animal organisms, for Hegel, cannot make their inner souls fully manifest in their external body because they do not possess properly inner souls in the first place. They do not possess an inner, spiritual side that stands in opposition to the external, natural body. Accordingly, they also lack the further capacity to accomplish a unity of inner and outer that becomes manifest (rather than being merely expressed) and externally visible in the body. Only human bodies have that 'peculiar spiritual stamp', Hegel writes.<sup>32</sup>

### The Limitations of Habit

We have seen above that for Hegel, the acquisition of habit is associated not merely with the soul's becoming actual, objectively manifest, but also with a kind of liberation. Once the human soul has become a bearer of habit, the human body has been turned from a natural entity with all sorts of immediately given dispositions, determinations and qualities into a manifestation of the unity of inner and outer—from first into second nature. The thoroughly trained, habituated body is therefore no longer something alien from or opposed to the human being's spiritual side, something that limits

and restricts it. In this sense, a liberation from the natural body *as* a merely natural body has occurred; the human being's spiritual and natural side have been integrated into one unity that Hegel calls the actual soul.

It is interesting to note in this context that this liberation of spirit from 'otherness' does not consist in a complete eradication of what is initially alien and opposed to spirit, but rather in its adaptation and transformation. Thus, even though Hegel speaks of second nature as being 'posited', he does not take the second nature of habit to be created entirely from scratch, as it were. Rather, second nature results from a transformation and integration of first nature. But this also means that the process of transformation is constrained and partly determined by the particular conditions given with first nature. For instance, in Hegel's view, the human individual, alone among all animals, can acquire the habit of walking and standing upright. But the human body is also *made* to walk and stand upright by nature—a human individual would not be properly equipped to crawl all of his or her life, for instance. Likewise, a human individual could not acquire the habit of living under water, of flying, or of climbing trees like a monkey. Certain natural desires and needs are also initially immediately given to the human individual that are simply a part of his natural equipment. A human being can regulate his or her satisfaction by acquiring habits, but one cannot choose not to have them at all. Thus Hegel emphasizes that the violent oppression of natural needs and passions is not a viable way of freeing oneself from them.<sup>33</sup> More generally, accomplishing the unity of inner and outer that constitutes the actual soul is a process running partly in a natural way (by involving mechanical, bodily processes beyond the individual's intentional control) and partly in a spiritual way (by involving intentional, deliberate action). Hence, human first nature sets limits to and to a certain extent even positively determines how human second nature turns out to be.

There is a second sense in which the liberation achieved through habit is limited on Hegel's account. Habit is necessarily acquired through repetition and practice—repetition and practice is the only way in which natural determinations such as sensations and our natural body in general can be turned into a manifestation of the soul. However, repetition and practice also results in a quasi-natural, mechanical necessity—habit is second nature for Hegel, as we have seen. This quasi-natural necessity is the price to be paid in order for the identity of inner and outer that constitutes the actual soul to appear: the soul can be actual only as involved in the mechanical necessity of habit. However, because of the quasi-natural necessity associated with habit, Hegel points out that the liberation achieved through habit is in danger of being perverted into its opposite:

Therefore although, on the one hand, by habit a man becomes free, yet, on the other hand, habit makes him his *slave*. Habit is not an *immediate*, *first* nature, dominated by the individuality of sensations. It is rather a *second* nature *posited* by the soul. But all the same it is still



a *nature*, something *posited* that assumes the shape of *immediacy*, an *ideality* of being that is itself still burdened with the form of *being*, consequently something not corresponding to free spirit, something merely *anthropological*.<sup>34</sup>

Habituation can therefore easily turn out as a sort of cul-de-sac from Hegel's point of view: the apparent liberation that is achieved through it is soon turned into its opposite, leaving the soul a slave of its habits.

Another way of describing what happens in such a case of 'enslavement' through habituation is that the natural element, which is involved in the unity of inner and outer that constitutes the actual soul, becomes too dominant. As we have seen, Hegel refers to the actual soul as an 'identity of the inner with the outer, *the outer being subjugated to the inner*':<sup>35</sup> in the actual soul, inner and outer are unified in one movement, but this movement can be legitimately described as a spiritual one, as it aims at the liberation from natural immediacy, or the transformation of natural immediacy into something more spiritual. In other words, whereas this movement has both natural and spiritual elements (or, more accurately, involves both an inner and an outer), it also has a clearly spiritual *telos*, as it were. But this teleology is frustrated if habituation culminates in a state in which one is enslaved by a quasi-natural necessity. In this case, the unity of spirit and nature at the same time amounts to a return back to nature—one might describe it as an identity of inner with the outer in which the *inner* is subjugated by the *outer*, rather than vice versa.

The fact that habituation can amount to a relapse into a state of quasi-natural necessity is probably also the reason why, in Hegel's view, the actual soul marks a rather preliminary stage in the overall development of human subjective spirit. It is true that in one sense, the acquisition of habit concludes the development of the soul (that is, of natural spirit) for Hegel by allowing it to become an *actual* soul. But in another sense, the soul's becoming actual marks merely the point of transition just before the soul develops into something 'higher': beyond the acquisition of habit, the soul becomes spirit proper, a subject or an 'I'.<sup>36</sup>

At the stage of the actual soul, spirit and body constitute an identity of inner and outer; the inner is liberated from its opposition to the outer natural body, or to first nature in general, and finds itself reflected and manifest in the body. However, ultimately, the spirit cannot stay at rest in this identity with the appropriated body on Hegel's account. Rather, spirit has to withdraw from this identification—that is to say, it has to distinguish itself again from the identity of inner and outer in which constitutes the actual soul. What happens at this point of withdrawal is, on the one hand, that spirit now begins to distinguish itself from the thoroughly appropriated body and conceive of it as something alien to itself, an object in 'a world *external to it*'.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, spirit now becomes aware of or for itself as a subject or I; that is, it learns to refer to itself independent of all its concrete



bodily manifestations. Taken together, these two aspects of spirit's withdrawal from the body mean that spirit is turned into *consciousness*: a mode of spirit that is split up into subjective self-certainty on the one hand, and awareness of an objective world, distinct from the subject, on the other. For spirit as consciousness, its own body also consists in an object in the world, rather than being simply identical with itself.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately, Hegel does not discuss in detail how exactly this transition from actual soul to consciousness proceeds. What is clear, in any case, is that it culminates in the spirit's distinguishing itself from the identity of inner and outer that constitutes the actual soul. That is, spirit now distinguishes itself from its *appropriated* body, from the body it previously conceived of as its own and used to identify with. This distinction of the soul from its embodiment is therefore categorically different from the kind of opposition to the body described above, which is experienced before the unity of inner and outer has been accomplished: whereas here the body is experienced as entirely alien, in the present opposition, in contrast, spirit distinguishes itself from the body conceived as a unity of inner and outer, or as actual soul. The present kind of opposition is possible only *after* the unity of inner and outer has been accomplished.

In his introduction to the 'Philosophy of Spirit', Hegel explains that the capacity to distinguish itself from its own embodiment, from that which is identical with itself as its own manifestation, ultimately lies at the core of spirit's freedom. This freedom, furthermore, constitutes part of the very essence of spirit. Hegel writes:

[F]ormally the *essence* of spirit is *freedom* [. . .]. In accordance with this formal determination, the spirit *can* abstract from everything external and from its own externality, from its very life; it can endure the negation of its individual immediacy, infinite *pain*, i.e. it can maintain itself affirmatively in this negativity and be identical for itself.<sup>39</sup>

The freedom of spirit ultimately consists not merely in the capacity to appropriate one's body and manifest itself in it—to turn it from an 'other' into its own—but furthermore requires the capacity to turn against this embodiment and distinguish oneself from it. Hegel writes that the actual soul, because it is 'subjectivity or *Selbstischkeit*', is already 'in itself' spirit—that is, it has the potential to become spirit in the full sense of the term.<sup>40</sup> But this potential is not yet realized, because the actual soul is stuck, as it were, in its identity with the body. The actual soul, therefore, has not yet accomplished the full freedom of spirit. Only once it takes the step to distance itself from or oppose itself to its own embodiment does it begin to actualize its spiritual potential. However, nevertheless, being identical with its external body, or being an actual soul, is a crucial stage through which the soul has to pass in order to gain full freedom as spirit. For spirit is free by distinguishing itself

from its *own* embodiment; accordingly, it first has to be embodied, in order to then be able to gain freedom by negating this external manifestation of it.

Because the actual soul is essentially engrossed in habitual activity, and the development of consciousness involves the distancing of spirit from its embodiment, it follows that the soul, in order to become consciousness, has to distance itself from its habits. Willem deVries gives a plausible account of what happens, more concretely, when this distancing occurs. As deVries points out, the I does not emerge for Hegel when the soul has come to organize its sensations and actions in habitual patterns. Rather, a ‘further recursion’ is required: the soul has to subject its habitual patterns of behavior to a second-order structuring or organization. This is possible where the soul becomes capable of taking a stance towards the habits inhering in it and structuring them according to principles, for instance by resolving conflicts between two mutually exclusive habitual patterns. In order to solve a conflict between conflicting habitual patterns according to a principle, one has to be able to override the (quasi-natural) necessity arising from the individual habitual patterns and abstain from acting in the way they dictate. This is what spirit learns to do once it distinguishes itself from its immediate embodiment in habit. Thus gaining the full freedom characteristic of spirit or consciousness also means that spirit must overcome its ‘enslavement’ in habit that it is potentially subject to at the stage of the actual soul.<sup>41</sup>

Hegel points out that the step of distinguishing oneself from one’s own embodiment, from that which one identifies with, is painful for the spirit, and that spirit’s capacity to negate its own embodiment is tantamount to the capacity to endure a certain kind of pain, the pain arising from such inner division. One can therefore also draw the conclusion at this point that the actual soul, because it has not yet carried out this negation, is on the other hand still free from the pain of inner division. The identity, or unity, of inner and outer that constitutes the actual soul stands in contrast to the pain of inner division that the spirit has to endure in order to become spirit proper.

In sum, whereas Hegel celebrates the human actual soul as an identity of inner and outer, and as a form of liberation of the soul from otherness, he also indicates that this cannot be more than a preliminary stage in the development of spirit. Not only does habituation come with the danger of self-enslavement, moreover, the soul as identical with the external body yet fails to actualize its full spiritual potential—it has not yet taken the decisive step in virtue of which it becomes a genuine subject or I. We can therefore conclude at this point that the identity of inner and outer as embodied by the actual soul on the one hand constitutes an admirable accomplishment for Hegel—in particular, it is admirable because it constitutes a source of aesthetic excellence—but on the other hand implies serious limitations. Both the aesthetic excellence of the actual soul and its deficiencies will be addressed in more detail in the following chapters.

## SYMBOL, SIGN AND THE HUMAN FIGURE

One important result of the above discussion was that the actual soul constitutes a peculiar kind of sign for Hegel: a spiritual-natural sign in which a unity of inner and outer manifests itself. This is a peculiar sign because, as explained above, it does not consist in an outer body expressing an inner mental state that is distinct from it; expression here does not consist in an 'externalization' of something inner. Rather, this is a unity of inner and outer that manifests itself—a kind of self-manifestation or, if you will, self-signification. However, even though Hegel himself refers to the actual soul as a 'sign', this use of terminology can seem somewhat surprising from his point of view. To see why, it is helpful to consider the actual soul in contrast with another kind of signifying entity that plays a prominent role in Hegel's *Aesthetics*: the symbol.

We tend to use the term 'sign' in a general sense, according to which letters, words, flags, street signs and perhaps even the human figure are all signs, even though they may be different kinds of signs. Hegel does sometimes use the term sign in this general sense; more often, however, he is interested in drawing a distinction between *symbol* and *sign*.<sup>42</sup> This distinction is based on the different way in which the sign on the one and the symbol on the other hand are related to their meaning, or to that which they signify.

According to Hegel's usage of the term, the relation between a symbol and that which it symbolizes is not a purely conventional one, as for instance the relation between a word and the meaning it stands for. Rather, there is at least a partial immediate similarity or resemblance between the symbol and what it symbolizes. Thus to use Hegel's first example of a symbol in the *Aesthetics*, a lion can symbolize political power, say, because the lion is itself a strong and powerful animal.<sup>43</sup> However, at the same time, a lion has a lot of other properties that bear no signifying relation to the content it is supposed to symbolize: the lion's mane or tail, for example, are irrelevant to the signification of power. On the other hand, political power has many aspects it does not share with a lion: for instance, it can be used to manipulate people, or it can be shared among a group of people. Furthermore, the lion might equally be used to symbolize something else, for instance it may appear on the flag of a country or region. In fact, we can never be sure, when seeing the image of a lion, what exactly it is that is supposed to be symbolized by it or, indeed, whether it is functioning as a symbol on this particular occasion at all. Even though there is some unity or similarity between the symbol and its content, then, there remains a considerable difference between them as well, which makes the association between the symbol and its intended meaning somewhat precarious.<sup>44</sup> Whether a lion symbolizes strength, or something else, or nothing at all, depends ultimately on whether the symbol is used and intended to be understood in a certain way.

In contrast to the symbol, the sign does not signify its content in virtue of a similarity between itself and its content. Instead, the sign operates on

the basis of the tacit understanding that whatever inherent (sensuous) quality the sign might have is irrelevant to its function as a sign. When reading a sign, one abstracts fully from its inherent (sensuous) qualities, which are therefore not a potential source of confusion, or of a mismatch between the sign and its content, as in the symbol. This abstraction is a result of the fact that the signifying relationship between the sign and its content is a purely conventional one: the sign has been *assigned* a meaning or content, and it can designate this content in virtue of the conventional agreement that the difference between the sign and its content is to be ignored.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, this assignment of meaning to the sign is purely arbitrary: precisely because the sign works on the basis of a conventional agreement to disregard the difference between itself and its meaning, any sign can designate anything. Thus the word 'dog' has been conventionally agreed to designate a particular kind of animal, and this designation works because we have learned to associate this word with the animal, without being bothered by the fact that the word and the animal have nothing relevant in common. However, we could equally well have agreed to designate the same animal by the word 'cat'. Hegel summarizes the distinction between symbol and sign in the following words:

The *sign* is different from the *symbol*, from an intuition whose *own* determinacy is, in its essence and concept, more or less the concept which it expresses as symbol; in the sign as such, by contrast, the intuition's own content and the content of which it is a sign, have nothing to do with each other.<sup>46</sup>

Hegel's distinction between the sign and the symbol is clear enough. However, in light of this distinction, it appears odd at first sight that Hegel explicitly refers to the trained human body, which constitutes part of the actual soul, as a *sign* of the soul.<sup>47</sup> To be sure, the trained body cannot be conceived of as a *symbol* of the soul from Hegel's point of view. For, in the case of the actual soul, the body not merely points to its content, like the symbol, as something that is partly similar to, but partly different from the symbol itself. Rather, Hegel holds that the actual soul constitutes an *identity* of inner and outer; hence the actual soul as sign does not signify something other than itself. Precisely this identity of the sign and what it signifies is missing from the symbol.<sup>48</sup> But on the other hand, the actual soul also cannot be understood as a *sign* in the narrow sense of the term just outlined, according to which the sign is to be contrasted with the symbol. For the signifying relation between the actual soul and what it signifies is obviously not based on convention, nor is it an arbitrary one. It is not arbitrary, because the actual soul could not be what it is, a self-signifying sign, if it was to signify something else than itself. It is not conventional, because the unity of inner and outer in virtue of which the actual soul becomes a self-signifying sign is not bestowed on it from the outside, through convention. Rather,

both inner and outer (in other words, both spiritual and natural elements) ‘cooperate’, as it were, in order to be joined in one movement, thus constituting a unity of inner and outer. Thus, in a certain sense one can say that the self-signifying sign that is the actual soul is created by itself, that is, by the elements that constitute it, rather than receiving its signifying characteristic through external convention. This latter aspect also distinguishes the human figure further from the symbol: the signifying relation between the symbol and its content is also to a certain extent conventional or grounded in the way the symbol is being used. Neither the sign nor the symbol have given *themselves* the meaning they possess.<sup>49</sup> More generally, both the symbol and the sign in the more narrow sense lack the identity of the sign and what it signifies that is characteristic of the actual soul. They both operate under the presupposition of a difference and distinction between the sign and its meaning, which is more or less substantial, and which the signifying relation seeks to overcome in one or the other way. Thus the actual soul does not seem to fit very well into either Hegel’s category of sign or symbol.<sup>50</sup>

However, Hegel’s rationale for calling the appropriated human body a sign may ultimately be the more basic observation that it has one important feature in common with the sign in the narrow sense of the term: the actual soul as self-signifying sign can only come into being where there is ‘spiritual labor’, that is, deliberate, intentional activity involved (even though, at the same time, natural, bodily processes such as mechanization are essentially involved as well). In contrast to the symbol, the actual soul does not possess its signifying quality in an immediate way; it *is* not simply the sign it is, but must be *made* into it. Thus, even though the actual soul as self-signifying sign is different in essential respects from an ordinary word, for instance, the two nevertheless have in common that it requires spiritual labor in order for them to be the signifying entities they are.

## CONCLUSION

In the present chapter, we looked in detail at Hegel’s account of what he calls natural spirit or the soul in his ‘Anthropology’. For Hegel, the human individual is unique and distinguished from all other animals in that it can accomplish an identity of inner soul and outer natural body. This identity of inner and outer is at the same time a special kind of sign: we can call this a self-signifying or self-manifesting sign, since here the sign and what it signifies are not two distinct entities. The identity of inner and outer manifests *itself*. That this uniquely human self-signifying identity of inner and outer is of aesthetic significance for Hegel becomes obvious when it is seen in the context of the *Aesthetics*. For it is in virtue of being capable of accomplishing this identity that the human individual is in a position to overcome the major aesthetic shortcoming of the animal organism that Hegel identifies in the *Aesthetics*: animals can never make their inner soul fully manifest in

their outer body. This is because animals do not possess souls that deserve to be called properly ‘inner’, that is, opposed to their outer body, in the first place. Only the human being both possesses a properly inner soul *and* is capable of making it externally manifest to the extent that one can speak of an identity of inner and outer, an identity of opposites. In the following chapters, I shall try to make the aesthetic relevance of the human figure as self-signifying sign more explicit by considering it in light of Hegel’s conception of beauty both in the *Aesthetics* and in the *Encyclopedia*.

## NOTES

1. In the following, I will use the term *Aesthetics* as a general one, referring to the Hotho edition of Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* as well as the different student transcripts edited by Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert.
2. VAI, 203/LAI, 153.
3. See Aesth. 1823, 47: ‘Was nun die Idee ihrer Natur nach, als natürlich Lebendiges überhaupt, betrifft oder das Schöne überhaupt, so fällt das Schöne mit dem Lebendigen zusammen’. See also Aesth. 1826, 37; VAI, 167/LAI, 122.
4. VAI, 166/LAI, 123; see also Enz., § 55.
5. Enz., § 350; VAI, 157–66/LAI, 116–23. Closely related to the idea that the organism’s subject or self is being reflected in its parts is the notion of natural teleology is the idea that the parts of an organism are unified as a means to a common, internal purpose. On Hegel’s conception of natural purpose (*Naturzweck*) in relation to Kant’s, see Kreines 2008.
6. VAI, 164/LAI, 122.
7. Phän, § 17. As immediately intuited, this evidence is of course merely suggestive, and provides no actual *proof* for the truth of idealism. What it shows, in Hegel’s view, is that the idealist position is not counterintuitive, but resonates with our ordinary sensuous perception of the world. See also Enz., § 55.
8. See Aesth. 1823, 47; Aesth. 1826, 37.
9. Aesth. 1823, 64 ff.
10. Ibid., 69–70.
11. VAI, 190–202/LAI, 143–52; Aesth. 1823, 73–79.
12. VAI, 194/LAI, 146.
13. Hegel’s notion of habit, as his ‘Anthropology’ in general, has been given comparatively little scholarly attention. Most studies that consider Hegel’s discussion of habit are concerned with the function of habit in Hegel’s conception of the development of subjective spirit (see for instance Wolff 1991, Wolff 1992, DeVries 1988; for a more detailed discussion of Hegel’s notion of habit in particular, see McCumber 1990, Forman 2010). To my knowledge, only Catherine Malabou, in the first part of her study *L’Avenir de Hegel* (Malabou 1996), has so far pointed out that a link can be drawn between Hegel’s anthropology—in particular his notion of habit, which is for Malabou the paradigm example of Hegel’s conception of the ‘plasticity’ of spirit, i.e. its capacity for self-formation—on the one hand, and his aesthetic theory on the other.
14. Enz., § 410.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., § 382.

19. Fragment, 528, my translation.
20. Enz., § 387, Remark.
21. See Enz., § 469; PhR, §§ 5–7.
22. There is a peculiarity to Hegel's account of habit in the 'Anthropology' that needs to be mentioned here. Judging in light of the list of different types of habit Hegel presents in the 'Anthropology', the category of habit as he conceives it comprises a surprisingly heterogeneous array of phenomena: the hardening against sensations through repeated exposure, the 'dulling' of desires as a result of them being satisfied regularly, as well as bodily skills (see Enz., § 410). This raises the question of what these different phenomena have in common or, in short, what unifies the phenomenon of habit from Hegel's point of view. The short answer to this question, I would suggest, is that what they have in common from Hegel's point of view is that they are all instances of a unity of spiritual and natural movements in the sense explained above. In order to fully justify this claim, one would have to demonstrate why this is the case with regard to each of the particular types of habit Hegel considers; however, for the purposes of the present discussion this will not be necessary.
23. Enz., § 410, Addition. Elizabeth Anscombe, in her *Intention*, discusses the same phenomenon in which Hegel is interested here. She writes that 'as Aristotle says, one does not deliberate about an acquired skill; the description of what one is doing, which one completely understands, is at a distance from the details of one's movements, which one does not consider at all' (Anscombe 2000, 53–54).
24. There is another aspect to the process of acquiring a bodily skill that is important for Hegel: just like the hardening against sensations, it can be described as a process of 'universalizing' bodily movements. For instance, the purpose of writing the capital letter 'A' can be pursued by performing a variety of different acts: writing three straight lines, writing three crooked lines, writing them in different order. In this sense, the act of writing an 'A' is a universal comprising a variety of different individual acts. Thus one might say that what becomes mechanical through the acquisition of skill is the mediation between the individual bodily movements and the universal that they end up constituting. Once the subject has acquired the skill of writing, for instance, she can immediately conceive of her bodily movements as tokens of a universal and no longer attends to their individual differences (see Enz., § 410, Addition).
25. See for instance his discussion of freedom in the *Philosophy of Right*, where he states that freedom consists in a *unity* of indetermination and determination, rather than in the (abstract) negation of all determination (see PhR, §§ 5–7).
26. Enz., § 387.
27. Ibid., § 411.
28. Hegel categorically distinguishes the actual soul as a *sign* of spirit from the symbol. In the actual soul, the sign and what it signifies are identical. The symbol, in contrast, always operates on the presupposition of a (partial) distinction between the sign and its meaning (Aesth. 1823, 157–58; Aesth. 1826A, 146). See the final section of this chapter for further discussion.
29. Enz., § 383.
30. Ibid., § 410.
31. Ibid., Addition. See also *ibid.*, Remark, where Hegel speaks of the '*Ein-und Durchbildung*' of bodiliness.
32. Ibid., § 411, Addition. Hegel explains here that pathognomic expressions, that is, expressions of feelings and sensations, are partly shared between human beings and non-human animals. In contrast, those manifestations of the soul to which freedom is essential are specifically human. He writes:



The *involuntary* embodiment of inner sensations [. . .] is, in part, something that man has in common with animals. By contrast, the embodiments occurring with *freedom* [. . .], impart to the human body a peculiar spiritual stamp, by which man is distinguished from animals far more than by any mere natural determinacy. On his purely bodily side, man is not greatly different from the ape, but by the spirit-pervaded aspect of his body he is distinguished from that animal to such a degree that a smaller difference obtains between the appearance of an ape and that of a bird than between the body of a man and that of an ape. (Ibid.)

33. Ibid., § 410, Addition:

It is just by disregard or even maltreatment of my physical body that I would make my relationship to it one of dependence and of externally necessary connection; for in this way I would make it into something—despite its identity with me—*negative* towards me and consequently *hostile*, and would compel it to rise up against me, to take revenge on my mind. If, by contrast, I conduct myself in accordance with the laws of my bodily organism, then my soul is free in its physical body.

34. Ibid.  
35. Ibid., § 411, my emphasis.  
36. This transition is described in *ibid.*, § 412.  
37. Ibid.  
38. Ibid., § 413.  
39. Ibid., § 382.  
40. Ibid., § 412, Addition. Wallace/Miller/Inwood translate ‘*Selbstischkeit*’—a term of art—as ‘selfishness’, which may be misleading.  
41. DeVries 1988, 101–102.  
42. See Magnus 2001, 43–44.  
43. VAI, 395–97/LAI, 304–306.  
44. Dow Magnus distinguishes between three aspects of the symbol that are potential sources of confusion and misinterpretation: the symbol cannot express the whole of its meaning; the symbol expresses too much, because it expresses qualities that are indifferent to its intended meaning; and the symbol is not necessarily recognized as a symbol. All of these possibilities of misinterpretation are grounded in the fact, as Magnus sums up nicely, that ‘the symbol works on the basis of both an identity with and a difference from its meaning’ (Magnus 2001, 44).  
45. See *ibid.*, 43.  
46. *Enz.*, § 458, Remark.  
47. Ibid., § 411.  
48. Hegel’s discussion of the difference between the symbolic and the classical forms of art in the *Aesthetics* provides further evidence that the human figure, considered as a sign of the soul, is essentially not a symbol for Hegel:

Denn in der menschlichen Gestalt als in einer Weise des Sinnlichen des Geistes, ist der Leib kein Symbol mehr, er drückt kein anderes aus, bedeutet kein Fremdes, sondern seine Bedeutung erscheint auf der Oberfläche selbst. Im Symbol ist nur ein Teil der Bedeutung entsprechend. Dies ist im menschlichen Leibe nicht. (*Aesth.* 1823, 158)

Die menschliche Gestalt ist nicht nur lebendig wie das Tier, sondern der Spiegel des Geistes. Das Auge sieht nicht nur aus sich, sondern durch dasselbe sieht man in die einfache Seele. Die Entwicklung dieses Keimes ist die



lebendige Formation der Gestaltung und der Leib also nicht nur Symbol des Geistes, sondern der Geist ist im Leib unmittelbar für Andere vorhanden. (Aesth. 1823, 157)

I discuss these sections in more detail in chapter 3.

49. Thus Hegel states that a spiritual content, insofar as it is symbolized, is abstract and ‘without measure’ (*maßlos*), because it lacks the capacity to give itself a form, to create a sign of itself. Likewise, the form in the symbolic relation is not yet the ‘absolute form’, Hegel states, because it is not yet necessarily associated with its own content. See Aesth. 1826, 27.
50. Magnus also notes that for Hegel, the sign ‘plays a vital role [. . .] in spirit’s corporal [. . .] expressions’ (Magnus 2001, 37), but she does not address the question of how spirit’s corporal expression fits into Hegel’s category of the sign in distinction from the symbol, given that with regard to the sign, Hegel’s emphasis is on arbitrary and conventional association between the sign and its meaning.

## 2 Hegel on Beauty, Nature and Art

### Towards a Novel Interpretation

In the preceding chapter, we looked at Hegel's account of the human capacity to turn one's body into a sign of the soul such that the soul becomes fully manifest in the body. I suggested that this capacity is relevant with regard to the aesthetic excellence of the human being for Hegel. This becomes obvious when we consider it in the context of Hegel's discussion of the aesthetic deficiency of animal organisms in comparison with human beings in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. For it is in virtue of this capacity that humans can overcome what Hegel identifies in the *Aesthetics* as the major aesthetic shortcoming of animal organisms: in contrast to the human soul, the animal soul cannot become an actual soul in which inner and outer are identical and the former becomes fully manifest in the latter.

I now want to take this argument further by looking at Hegel's explicit discussion of beauty both in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* and in the *Aesthetics* in light of the results reached in chapter 1. It will become obvious in the first part of the chapter that this provides *prima facie* evidence for the conclusion that for Hegel, the living human body in which inner and outer constitute an expressive unity embodies in fact the primary example of a beautiful object. However, such evidence will not be sufficient to establish the intended conclusion, as the conclusion has strongly controversial implications: most importantly, the implication that beauty is not exclusive to art in Hegel's account. This implication is at odds with the predominant view in the literature that for Hegel beauty is limited to the sphere of art.<sup>1</sup> As sketched in the introduction, in order to make argumentative progress at this point, it will be necessary to address the major reasons commentators have offered in order to motivate this restriction of beauty to the sphere of art in Hegel. The second part of the chapter is dedicated to calling these reasons into question. By the end of the chapter, I plan to have accomplished the second step in the argumentative structure sketched in the introduction, the direct refutation of the predominant view that Hegel takes beauty to be exclusive to art. This will then move us even closer towards establishing the thesis that, for Hegel, the living human figure is the primary and paradigmatic instance of a beautiful object.

## HEGEL ON BEAUTY, ART AND THE HUMAN FIGURE

## Beauty, Art and the Human Figure in the 'Encyclopedia'

Hegel's most famous and most often quoted definition of beauty can be found in the Hotho edition of his *Lectures on Aesthetics*: beauty is the 'sensual reflection (*Scheinen*) of the Idea'.<sup>2</sup> However, the definition of beauty Hegel offers in the *Encyclopedia* is in fact more helpful, because it describes in more detail the structure, or rather the process, that underlies beauty on Hegel's account. Hegel writes here that the shape (*Gestalt*) of beauty consists of

the concrete *intuition* and representation of the *implicitly* absolute spirit as the *Ideal*. In this Ideal—the concrete shape (*Gestalt*) born of subjective spirit—natural immediacy is only a *sign* of the Idea, it is so transfigured by the informing (*einbildender*) spirit for the expression of the Idea, that nothing else is shown in the shape;—the shape of *beauty*.<sup>3</sup>

Leaving aside for a moment the question of what Hegel means by the terms 'Ideal' and 'Idea', we can note that there is a striking similarity between this definition of beauty and Hegel's account of the relation between the human soul and the body as discussed in the previous chapter. Not only does Hegel crucially draw on the notion of 'sign' in both cases, but moreover, the kind of sign he is speaking about appears to be the same in both cases. The body, insofar as it has become a sign of the soul, is a natural entity that has been formed—'transfigured'—by the soul—the 'forming (*einbildender*) spirit'—in such a way that it has become a sign of the soul. As we saw, this is a peculiar kind of sign. Here, the inner is not distinct from the outer, and becomes externalized only as it expresses itself. Rather, inner and outer are unified and it is this unity that manifests itself. The duality of inner and outer has been overcome, and likewise the duality of the sign or expression and that which is signified or expressed by it. In this sense, we can speak of a self-signifying sign here. This connects with Hegel's statement in the quotation above that here the sign shows nothing but its content: the sign and its content are in fact unified and cannot be separated from each other.

Most importantly, however, Hegel states here that the beautiful shape is an *Ideal*, which is a sign of the *Idea*. In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel defines the *Idea* as follows: 'The *Idea* is nothing other than the unity (*Einheit*) of the concept and reality in general, the concept is the soul and reality is bodiliness. In the *Idea*, concept and reality are not neutralized, they do not become blunt (*abgestumpft*)'.<sup>4</sup> The *Ideal*, Hegel continues, is the *Idea* as sensuously perceptible or manifest. Accordingly, the *Ideal* is 'the complete unification of the soul and the body'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the *Ideal* (which is the beautiful shape, according to the definition given in the *Encyclopedia*) is a sensuously perceptible sign for Hegel in which the sign on the one hand—reality, bodiliness, natural

immediacy—and what it signifies on the other—the soul, the concept—are unified. In other words, for Hegel the essence of the beautiful shape is to be a self-signifying sensuous-spiritual sign, a sign that signifies only itself, whose meaning is itself. In our discussion of habit and the actual soul in the preceding chapter, we have seen how this notion of a self-signifying sensuous sign can be understood more specifically as the human actual soul in which spirit and natural body are unified.

On the other hand, it must be noted that the definition of beauty from the *Encyclopedia* just quoted occurs under the heading ‘Art’. This suggests, in any case, that art must play some important role in the creation of beauty in Hegel’s view, and that the beautiful shape cannot simply be identified with the actual human figure that has been turned into a sign of the soul. Two paragraphs further in the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel explicitly addresses the relation between art and the human figure, making the following claim:

Art not only needs, for the intuitions to be produced by it, an external given material, which includes subjective images and representations. It also needs, for the expression of spiritual content, the given forms of nature together with their meaning, which art must discern and appropriate (cf. §411). Among such formations the human is the supreme and genuine formation, because only in it can the spirit have its bodiliness and thus an expression accessible to intuition. [Remark] This takes care of the principle of the *imitation of nature* in art, about which no agreement is possible when the contrast is so abstract, as long as the natural is taken only in its externality, not as a characteristic, meaningful natural form signifying the spirit.<sup>6</sup>

Hegel states here that art needs to let itself be guided by certain given forms of nature that are inherently meaningful, whose meaningfulness art has to be aware of, and whose meaning it has to ‘discern’. He also refers to § 411 in the *Encyclopedia*, which we have discussed in detail in the previous chapter: in this paragraph, Hegel describes what he calls the actual soul, the self-signifying unity of inner soul and external body. Following this reference, the human figure is described as the ‘highest’ and ‘most truthful’ one, and, most remarkably, as the *only* one in which ‘spirit can have its bodiliness and thus an expression accessible to intuition’.<sup>7</sup> In the remark, Hegel addresses the question of whether art should be understood as imitating nature or not. The remark is short and slightly obscure, but the point Hegel is trying to make is presumably the following: if art was to imitate natural objects or the natural world as such—landscapes, trees, flowers, rocks, rivers, animals and so on—it could not hope to thereby give expression to a spiritual content. Only insofar as art imitates those given forms of nature that are characteristic and meaningful in the sense that they have an inherent spiritual meaning can art express a spiritual content. Now, all of this suggests that Hegel wants to understand the practice of art or artistic

creation as standing in continuity with the *Einbildung* of spirit into natural immediacy he associates with the soul's becoming manifest in the human body as he describes it in his 'Anthropology'. Art 'imitates' not nature as such, but nature insofar as it presents itself as already bearing an inherent spiritual meaning—hence it imitates human nature, or the human figure, Hegel argues. Thus the paragraph quoted above suggests that art is for Hegel essentially the practice of expressing spirit, or spiritual contents, in sensuously perceptible form, and it takes its primary inspiration for this practice from the human figure, which is already in itself a natural expression of spirit. Furthermore, we have seen in § 556 that the *Einbildung* of spirit into natural immediacy, through which the latter becomes a sign of the former, is constitutive of beauty for Hegel.<sup>8</sup> Hence it seems plausible to conclude at this point that artistic beauty is created in Hegel's view through the imitation of such forms of nature that are already in themselves expressions of spirit. In other words, artistic beauty is created through the imitation of human individuals whose natural bodies have been thoroughly 'transfigured' into signs of spirit.

What is remarkable about this argument is that it suggests that for Hegel, the actual, living human figure provides something like a guide and model of orientation for art. In order to create beautiful works, art has to imitate the human figure as it is found in nature—not in 'immediate' nature, but in nature as unified with spirit. This claim has two implications that are at odds with the predominant interpretation of Hegel's conception of beauty in the literature. The first implication is that nature, or natural immediacy, constitutes an essential element of beauty, even of artistic beauty for Hegel, and that there is therefore a continuity between nature and artistic beauty in his view. As discussed in detail in the previous chapter, in the human figure, the soul manifests itself in natural form: the human body becomes a sign of the soul in which first nature is integrated into a manifestation of the soul, or into the unity of spirit and nature that Hegel also refers to as second nature. Hence nature is essentially present in the human figure insofar as the latter has been turned into a sign of the soul. Now if art creates beautiful shapes by imitating the human figure, artistic beauty consists in an imitation of the manifestation of spirit in natural form that is found in the actual human figure. This insistence of Hegel on the presence of nature and natural immediacy even in artistic beauty is also reflected both in his definition of beauty in *Enz.*, § 557, and in the following paragraph, § 558. In his definition, Hegel states that beauty is present where *natural immediacy* has become a sign of spirit; and in the following paragraph, he writes that the beautiful shape contains a 'unity of spirit and nature—i.e. the immediate unity, the form of intuition'.<sup>9</sup> However, the notion that nature constitutes an essential element of beauty for Hegel, in particular of artistic beauty, is in contradiction to some of the most influential interpretations of Hegel's conception of beauty. As we shall see shortly, Theodor W. Adorno, for instance, holds that nature is strictly excluded from beauty in Hegel's

view, and even puts this forward as his main criticism of Hegel's conception of beauty.

The second, even more fundamental implication is that beauty is not in principle restricted to art in Hegel's view, and that there is a continuity in aesthetic respect between human nature and art. To be sure, there is an ambiguity in the remarks quoted above on the relation between artistic beauty and the human figure: Hegel could mean either that artistic beauty is created through the imitation of *beauty* found in the human figure, or that through the artistic imitation of the human figure, something essential is added to it, the result being a beautiful shape or, in short, beauty. However, the similarity between Hegel's definition of beauty and his account of how the human soul manifests itself in the body suggests that in his view, art can be beautiful by imitating the human figure because the latter exhibits the very feature that is constitutive of beauty: the *Einbildung* of spirit into natural immediacy, through which the latter is turned into a sign of the former. At least *prima facie*, this suggests that in Hegel's view, there are no *a priori* reasons why an actual human figure could not be genuinely beautiful. In contrast, most commentators hold that for Hegel, beauty is exclusive to art, and in such a way that the beauty of art is a *sui generis* phenomenon, which, for *a priori* reasons, cannot be found anywhere else outside of the sphere of art.

### Beauty, Art and the Human Figure in the 'Lectures on Aesthetics'

Before discussing in detail some of the interpretations of Hegel's conception of beauty that are at odds with the argument outlined above and its implications, I want to provide further evidence that the considerations in the *Encyclopedia* just discussed constitute an important strand in Hegel's thought about the nature of beauty. Numerous passages can be found in the *Aesthetics* in which Hegel expresses the view that the human figure, thanks to its capacity to become a sign of the soul, fulfills the function of an aesthetic model that art, more specifically beautiful art, has to imitate. In the following, I shall quote some of these passages at length in order to demonstrate that in the *Aesthetics*, Hegel pursues at greater length the same lines of thought that are condensed in the few paragraphs from the *Encyclopedia* just discussed. The relevant passages can be found in two different contexts in the *Aesthetics*. Some of them occur in Hegel's discussion of the nature of beauty and the beautiful shape in general. The other passages occur in Hegel's discussion of a particular type of art, in distinction from a different type: classical art in distinction from symbolic art. Classical art, by which Hegel means mainly ancient Greek art, is for Hegel historically the first (and arguably the only) type of art in which genuine beauty can be found. In the last section of the previous chapter, I briefly considered Hegel's usage of the term 'sign' in reference to the human figure signifying its inner soul. We saw that for Hegel, the human figure cannot be considered as a

*symbol* of its inner soul, because the relation it bears to its meaning, the inner soul, is essentially different from the relation between a symbol and that which it symbolizes. Precisely this difference between the human figure and the symbol is also addressed in Hegel's discussion of the difference between symbolic and classical art.

The majority of the passages I want to discuss in the following are from Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert's recent editions of student transcripts of Hegel's lectures. I begin, however, with a passage from the Hotho edition of the *Aesthetics*. The passage occurs in a section in which Hegel discusses the relation between artistic beauty and nature in general:

The existing natural forms of the spiritual content are in fact to be regarded as symbolic in the general sense that they have no immediate value in themselves; on the contrary, they are an appearance of the inner and spiritual life which they express. This already, in their reality outside art, constitutes their ideality in distinction from nature as such, which does not display anything spiritual. Now in art, at its higher stage, the inner content of spirit is to acquire its external form. This content is there in the real spirit of man, and so, like man's inner experience in general, it has already present there its external form in which it is expressed. However readily this point may be granted, still, from the philosophical point of view, it is superfluous altogether to ask whether in existent reality there are such beautiful and expressive shapes and countenances which art can use immediately as a portrait for representing e.g. Jupiter (his majesty, repose, and power), Juno, Venus, Peter, Christ, John, Mary, etc. Of course you can argue for and against, but it remains a purely empirical question which, as empirical, cannot be settled. For the only way to decide it would be actually to exhibit these existing beauties, and for the Greek gods, for example, this might be a matter of some difficulty, and even at the present day one man might see perfect beauties, let us say, where another, a thousand times cleverer, did not.<sup>10</sup>

The passage begins with a similar thought as the one found in Enz., § 558: there are given forms of nature that have an inherent spiritual meaning, in particular the external form associated with the human inner life, the human figure. Hegel claims that art, in order to express inner spiritual content and thus to create beautiful figures—Hegel's examples of such figures are here Greek gods as well as Christian saints—has to take up these forms and make use of them. But the question of whether art can create a beautiful figure simply by copying or imitating an actual, living person is an empirical one, Hegel proceeds to argue: it depends on whether such 'perfect beauties' can be found in reality, and opinions diverge on this issue, Hegel states—the matter cannot be decided through philosophical inquiry. This passage suggests, then, that beauty can in principle be found

in actual human individuals in Hegel's view, and that, where such beauty is found, art can create beautiful figures by simply imitating it. With regard to the 'empirical question' of whether 'perfect beauties' can in fact be found in reality, Hegel seems to be leaning towards the skeptical side, however. Other passages in the *Aesthetics* suggest that in order to create beautiful figures, art has to *purify* the inherently meaningful given forms of nature by stripping away all those details that, in actual living human individuals, fail to reflect or express an inner spiritual content but are rather the result of brute natural forces. For in spite of the human capacity to intentionally form one's body and turn it into a manifestation of the soul, Hegel states, the actual human individual is nevertheless subject to all kinds of influences that interfere with this power. An actual human individual's appearance is never just a manifestation of spirit, but, with regard to some of its details at least, a result of the influence of brute natural powers that leave their marks on the human body by bringing about spots, pox, scars or paralyzed limbs. These brute natural powers may become dominant in an individual's external appearance to the extent that it can no longer be considered a manifestation of a unity of spirit and nature, just as an individual's character may be dominated by deviant passions rather than by the individual's attempts at (moral) self-education.<sup>11</sup> It becomes therefore the task of art, Hegel argues, to carry out the 'purification'<sup>12</sup> of the human individual as found in reality by showing it in fully idealized form, as a perfect sign and manifestation of the inner spirit. Judging from these passages, Hegel holds that artistic beauty is created through the completion or perfect actualization of the potential for beauty that can be found in actual, living human individuals. In most actual human individuals, their potential for embodying an expressive unity of inner and outer is actualized only to a small degree, and it is the task of art to bring the 'idealization' of human nature to perfection.

I now turn to some passages in which Hegel considers the nature of classical art more specifically. The human figure plays a particularly important role in classical art on Hegel's account. In the following passage from the Hotho edition, Hegel introduces the human figure as a solution to the 'unfree', external relation between meaning and form that can be found in the symbol or in symbolic art:<sup>13</sup>

If this unfree relation is to be dissolved, the shape must have its meaning already in itself and indeed, more precisely, the meaning of spirit. This shape is essentially the human form because the external human form is alone capable of revealing the spiritual in a sensuous way. The human expression in face, eyes, posture and air is material and in these is not what spirit is; but within this corporeality itself the human exterior is not only living and natural, as the animal is, but is the bodily presence which in itself mirrors the spirit. Through the eye we look into a man's soul, just as his spiritual character is expressed by his whole demeanor in general. If therefore the bodily presence belongs to spirit



as *its* existence, spirit belongs to the body as the body's inner being and is not an inwardness foreign to the external shape, so that the material aspect neither has in itself, nor hints at, some other meaning. The human form does carry in itself much of the general animal type, but the whole difference between the human and the animal body consists solely in this, that the human body in its whole demeanor evinces itself as the dwelling-place of spirit and indeed as the sole possible existence of spirit in nature. Therefore too spirit is immediately present for others in the body alone. But this is not the place to expound the necessity of this connection and the special correspondence of soul and body; here we must presuppose this necessity. Of course in the human form there are dead and ugly things, i.e. determined by other influences and by dependence on them; while this is the case, it is precisely the business of art to expunge the difference between the spiritual and the purely natural, and to make the external bodily presence into a shape, beautiful through and through developed, ensouled and spiritually living. It follows that in this mode of representation nothing symbolical remains in regard to the external shape, and every mere search, pressure, confusion, and distortion is cast away. For when the spirit has grasped itself as spirit, it is explicitly complete and clear, and so too its connection with the shape adequate to it on the external side is something absolutely complete and given, which does not first need to be brought into existence by way of a linkage produced by imagination in contrast to what is present. [. . .] This is the point of view from which to consider the idea that art has imitated the human form. According to the usual view, however, this adoption and imitation seems accidental, whereas we must maintain that art, once developed to its maturity, must of necessity produce its representations in the form of man's external appearance because only therein does the spirit acquire its adequate existence in sensuous and natural material.<sup>14</sup>

The importance of the human figure in classical art, and its categorical difference from the symbol, is also emphasized in the following two passages:

The second sphere is classical art. It is the free, adequate *Einbildung* of the formation into the concept; a content which possesses the form appropriate to it, which, as true content, does not lack the true form. This is where the Ideal of art stems from. The sensuous, figurative no longer counts as sensuous here, it is not a natural being; it is indeed a shape of nature (*Naturgestalt*), but one which, exempt from the deficiency of the finite, is perfectly adequate to its concept. The true content is the concretely spiritual (*das Geistige*), whose shape (*Gestalt*) is the human; for this alone is the shape of the spiritual, the way in which the spiritual can build itself into (*sich herausbilden*) temporal existence.<sup>15</sup>

Subjective spirituality [. . .] here has the power to show itself in its appearance. Determined more closely, this can only be the human appearance, because only in it can the spiritual reveal itself. It is here no longer symbolic, but the appearance of the spirit, the determination of the spirit, its stepping outside into existence. The sensuous shape (*Gestalt*) of the human being is the only one in which the spirit is capable of appearing. It is meaningful in itself; what it means is spirit, who steps outside through it. It is something corporeal, material, and in this respect distinct from spirit; but this form of the material is an appearance of the spiritual (*des Geistigen*). The human shape is not only alive, but the mirror of the spirit. The eye not only looks out, but through it one looks into the simple soul. The development of this seed is the living formation of the shape, and the body is therefore not a mere symbol of the spirit, but the spirit is immediately present for others in the body. Thus on the other side, the content is ready and can only appear as such in the human shape. To prove this would be a matter of physiology. The human shape is the necessary one of spirit appearing in sensuous existence. From this point of view one can also consider the notion that art has imitated the human shape, which it has found (*vorhand*), such that this imitation appears as a contingency (*Zufälligkeit*). But the human shape is the only necessary and possible one. Only in it does the spiritual represent itself. Because in the human shape as in a sensuous mode of spirit, the body is no longer a symbol, it does not express something other, does not mean something external, but its meaning appears on its surface itself. In the symbol, only a part corresponds to its meaning. This is not so in the human body.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, a further passage on classical art, the human figure and beauty:

The perfect unification of the soul and the body or the Ideal: classical art or beauty. With regard to classical art we cannot be as extensive as in the preceding, for we have already determined classical art by looking at the nature of art in general; classical art is no other than: where the concept of art is present and actualized. The meaning has become self-contained (*selbständig*) for itself; this self-contained meaning is the free spiritual individuality, the spiritual inner, which is at the same time alive, which is for itself, the universal, essential, absolute. [. . .] This shape (*Gestalt*) which has been formed (*umgebildet*) and created by spirit immediately has its meaning in itself, such that here the expression is immediately the spiritual (*das Geistige*). This is the human as existing individually and externally, but this naturalness is only the utterance (*das Aussprechen*) of spirit: this is the Ideal. The human shape as such is the animal shape, but a shape in which a spirit lives, and therefore what this shape shows is at the same time the spiritual itself. The shape does not present something else in addition, as it is the case

in the symbolic. In the human shape the spiritual appears immediately; this is the true permeation (*Durchdringung*) of the spiritual through the natural. [. . .] [T]he spiritual is the dominant element (*das Herrschende*) in the natural, the spiritual is what manifests itself in the body; this is the foundation of classical beauty.<sup>17</sup>

There are a number of ideas here that will look familiar by now: Hegel speaks of the *Einbildung* of the soul or spirit into the body, of the permeation of soul and body in which the soul remains the dominant part, and he uses repeatedly the term ‘immediacy’, emphasizing that the soul is immediately present in the body, as it is unified with the body as its sign. In fact, in the final passage Hegel speaks explicitly of the human figure as exhibiting a ‘self-contained meaning’, that is, a meaning that cannot be distinguished from the sign that gives expression to it. What comes out clearly, furthermore, is that Hegel holds that there is an essential relation between art and the human figure, at least insofar as classical art is concerned: art *must* ‘imitate’ the human figure in order to give expression to spiritual contents, for in the human figure, we can find a special, unique relation between inner soul and external shape, or spirit and nature. Furthermore, Hegel here seems to argue that precisely by imitating the human figure, art becomes beautiful, or creates beautiful shapes. Or rather, put more carefully, art becomes beautiful in the *classical* sense, or creates *classical* beauty, by imitating the human figure in which the inner soul manifests itself. We can add that this imitation will be unlikely to turn out to be the imitation of some actual, living, particular human being in Hegel’s view, for in actual human individuals, we are most likely to see only imperfect unities of inner soul and outer body. Nevertheless, in order to create a beautiful shape, art has to seek inspiration in the human figure, this ‘given form of nature’, while at the same time purifying it and actualizing its potential to become a sign of the inner soul.<sup>18</sup>

It should be noted at this point that it is possible to distinguish between what one might call a strong and a weak interpretation of the thesis that art, in order to create beautiful shapes, has to imitate the human figure as a sign of the soul. According to the weak interpretation, the beautiful work of art imitates the human figure simply by sharing with it a certain way in which its elements are internally related: for instance, the artwork’s content relates to its form in the way a human soul relates to the body in which it manifests itself—the content is immediately present and perceptible in the form, the form is sensuous, the content is spiritual and so on. According to the strong interpretation, the beautiful artwork imitates the human figure in the sense that it *represents* human individuals. One author who defends the weak interpretation is Stephen Bungay. Bungay argues that this interpretation need not be understood in the sense that Hegel takes the relation between content and form in the artwork to be *analogous* to the relation between human body and soul. Rather, because Hegel can resort to his logical categories in order to describe the interrelation between form and content on

the one hand and body and soul on the other, he can simply state that the same logical relation holds between both. Thus, Bungay writes:

It is worth noting that this parallel [i.e. between form and content in the artwork on the one hand, and body and soul in the human individual on the other] is not simply a metaphor [. . .] but constitutes a claim about how meaning is conveyed in art. It should be taken seriously at face value. It does not ground the mode of expression in art, but explicates it by giving an exact parallel, and in the same way, when body and soul is being dealt with in the *Anthropology*, the body is described as ‘das Kunstwerk der Seele’—‘the work of art of the soul’ (Enz., § 411). Both examples explicate each other [. . .].<sup>19</sup>

Bungay’s interpretation, however, does not seem to do justice to the gist of the passages from Hegel quoted above. On Hegel’s view, there is not just a *parallel* between the work of art and the relation between body and soul, but the latter serves as a model or guide that is found in nature by art, and that it must seek to imitate. In this respect, art rather seems to *depend* on the human figure as found in nature. Furthermore, Hegel emphasizes that spiritual content can be adequately expressed, or that ‘spirit can have its bodiliness’ only in the human figure or the human shape *as found in nature*. This suggests that the strong interpretation is in fact the more adequate one: art, in order to create beautiful shapes, does not just create shapes that are *like* the human figure with regard to the relation they bear to their content or meaning, but it imitates the human figure as found in nature in the sense that it represents it. In light of the passages quoted above, then, it seems to be more advisable to embrace the strong interpretation.

Many of the ideas introduced in the preceding discussion require further explication. How exactly are we to understand the relation between beautiful art and the human figure considered as a sign of its inner soul if the latter is supposed to provide both a model for the beautiful work of art and to be ‘idealized’ by it? And if the human figure signifying its inner soul is in fact the paradigmatic instance of a beautiful object for Hegel, what exactly makes beauty valuable on this account? I will try to answer these questions in the next chapter. For the moment, we should merely note that there is plenty of *prima facie* evidence, both in the *Encyclopedia* and in the *Aesthetics*, for the view that the human figure considered as sign of its inner soul is the paradigmatic instance of a beautiful object for Hegel, and that artistic beauty is somehow derived from, or created in reference to, the beauty found in the living human figure. One caveat should again be emphasized here: the close association between the human figure and artistic beauty seems to hold in Hegel’s view more specifically with regard to *classical* beauty. However, this qualification need not concern us at this point, for we will not consider the notion that there may exist different historical forms of (artistic) beauty in Hegel’s view until much later in the

argument, in chapter 6. For the time being, I will therefore continue to use the term 'beauty' without any qualification.

## CONTRARY READINGS OF HEGEL

### The Argument from Spiritual Mediation

As mentioned above, the interpretation developed in the preceding sections has two implications that both appear controversial from the point of view of some of the most influential interpretations of Hegel's conception of beauty: that beauty is not necessarily exclusive to art in Hegel's view, but that the actual human figure has the inherent potential to be beautiful; and that nature constitutes an essential element in beauty for Hegel. I will now consider the arguments of several commentators who are opposed in particular to the first thesis, and then turn to Adorno's influential account of Hegel's conception of beauty, which stands in opposition to both theses.

Most commentators hold that in Hegel's view, there are conceptual or a priori reasons why genuine beauty can only be found in art. One such reason that is evoked in different variations by several authors is a line of thought one might call the 'argument from spiritual mediation'. This argument roughly runs in the following way: for Hegel, beauty can only be present in objects that are intentionally made or created, and in this sense mediated by spirit. However, nothing found in nature is mediated by spirit in this way; *only* works of art exhibit the relevant kind of spiritual mediation. Hence, beauty belongs to the domain of art.<sup>20</sup>

One important variety of this line of argument revolves around the notion of artistic *Schein*. *Schein* is here understood as the semblance or illusory appearance exhibited by works of art: the objects presented by works of art *appear* to be ordinary objects that are simply there to be sensuously perceived, whereas in reality they are created for us to be so perceived by the artist. In other words, they appear to be immediately given, but in fact they are the product of spiritual, free creation; this distinguishes them from ordinary objects of nature.

Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert for instance writes that the central category in Hegel's aesthetic theory is the work (*das Werk*), that is, something made by human agents or 'born from spirit'.<sup>21</sup> On her view, the work, more specifically the work of art, is also the proper and exclusive locus of beauty for Hegel. Gethmann-Siefert reconstructs Hegel's reason for restricting beauty to artworks in the following way. Beauty is for Hegel essentially a way of conveying truth. But for Hegel, being an idealist, the truth about sensuous reality is that it is mediated through spirit. The work of art, in presenting a mere semblance or illusory appearance (*Schein*) of the natural, sensuous world created by a human agent—by 'spirit'—presents sensuous reality precisely under this essential aspect of spiritual mediation. The beautiful

semblance (*schöner Schein*) of works of art is therefore more truthful than the immediate sensuous appearance of the objects we encounter in reality: for these objects make us believe that they are simply immediately given to our senses, while the sensuous reality presented in the artwork makes its spiritual mediation explicit. In short, the objects represented in artworks draw their spectator's attention to the fact that they are mediated, made or 'posited' by spirit.<sup>22</sup>

In a somewhat similar vein, Stephen Bungay writes that '[b]eauty is art's Ideal because it is the centre, the point of balance between the mind and the senses which only art can reach'.<sup>23</sup> This 'point of balance' is grounded in the *Schein* of art: art is not just sensuous, but it exhibits a sensuousness that is made or mediated by spirit. The object represented in the artwork is thus more than it appears to be at first sight: even though it appears to be just an object given immediately to the senses, it is in reality mediated by spirit. Bungay writes: 'Art is 'Schein' because it is a human product and is more than it appears to be'.<sup>24</sup> As quoted above, Bungay holds that *Schein*, and hence the 'point of balance' between the mind and the senses, can only be found in art; it follows that beauty is exclusive to art in his view.

Finally, William Desmond develops a similar argument. He writes:

The work of art occupies a mean between pure thought and the immediately sensuous. It idealizes the sensuous, which no longer appears as brute uninformed materiality. The sensuous is spiritualized, spirit appears in sensuous shape, and the two together form a unity'.<sup>25</sup>

Desmond then goes on to locate the Ideal in art in Hegel's account: in the Ideal, 'thought and sensuous shape conform with each other and converge on an immediate unity'.<sup>26</sup> This is precisely what happens in art; hence the Ideal, or beauty, is to be found in art in Hegel's view.<sup>27</sup>

Gethmann-Sieft, Bungay and Desmond all agree that art is special for Hegel because it presents us with objects that are not merely immediately given, but mediated by spirit, and in which this spiritual mediation of the sensuous becomes sensuously perceptible.<sup>28</sup> This spiritual mediation stems from the fact that artworks are products of spirit, freely created by artists, and in this sense sensuous objects that are spiritually mediated. Likewise, the objects represented in artworks are mere appearances of objects, or objects made to appear by the artist. The spiritual mediation of the sensuous world, or the unity of spirit and sensuousness, becomes sensuously perceptible only in art, they proceed to argue—it is not apparent in the world as it is given to our senses, outside of art. But this sensuously perceptible unity of spirit and the sensuous is also constitutive of beauty; hence beauty is exclusive to art.<sup>29</sup>

I do not wish to take issue with the claim that artworks or objects represented in artworks can be understood as instances of 'spiritualized sensuousness', which moreover make their spiritual mediation sensuously perceptible, nor with the claim that beauty is present for Hegel where

sensuousness is mediated by spirit, and sensuously perceptible as being so mediated.<sup>30</sup> Rather, I want to focus on the claim that such sensuously perceptible spiritualized sensuousness is exclusive to art. As we have seen above, there is an important respect in which human nature or the human body, too, is a product of the human spirit and is a sensuously perceptible sign of spirit for Hegel. Hegel's crucial idea in this context is that through the acquisition of habit, human body and soul are unified and integrated into a self-signifying sign of the soul. This is because the acquisition of human habits involves and integrates both spiritual processes, such as deliberate, self-conscious, intentional activity, and natural processes, such as mechanization; both of these kinds of processes are essential elements in human habit. In this sense, the unity of spirit and nature that is manifest in the actual soul is clearly, at least in part, a product of spiritual activity. It is mediated through spirit's productive activity just like the work of art. From Hegel's point of view, then, the human figure, or human nature more generally, may legitimately be called a 'work' that bears the stamp of spiritual creation—it is a natural, sensuous form that has been spiritualized or mediated by spirit. We can therefore reject the claim that the relevant type of sensuously perceptible spiritual mediation, which is constitutive of beauty for Hegel, is exclusive to art. This claim functions as a central premise in the argument from spiritual mediation. Accordingly, we can reject its conclusion, according to which only works of art have the potential to be beautiful on Hegel's account.<sup>31</sup>

### A Continuity between Nature and Art?

The argument from spiritual mediation is not the only one that has been proposed in the literature in order to establish the thesis that beauty is, for Hegel, necessarily restricted to artworks. I now want to look at two further commentators who have devoted considerable attention to the question of where beauty is essentially located in Hegel's view. In contrast to the authors just discussed, they approach this issue explicitly as a question about Hegel's stance on the possibility of beauty in the realm of nature. Thus Brigitte Hilmer has reconstructed in some detail Hegel's transition from nature to artistic beauty in the *Aesthetics*, and comes to the conclusion that for Hegel, beauty is categorically limited to art. Theodor W. Adorno's arguments in this context are probably among the most famous ones of any commentator on Hegel's aesthetics. Adorno argues that Hegel's transition from nature or natural beauty to the beauty of art is deeply problematic, and criticizes Hegel for suppressing the potential beauty of nature in his theory. I will begin by looking at Hilmer's discussion.

Hilmer discusses Hegel's account of the place of beauty in the context of her attempt to demonstrate that Hegel's *Science of Logic* provides the systematic basis for his philosophy of art. In particular, she tries to show how Hegel's distinction between different types of logical syllogisms underlies his distinction between the symbolic, classical and romantic forms of art. In this



context, it is important for her to argue that the unity of the artwork is for Hegel essentially a syllogistic, rather than an organic unity, or that the living organism does not provide for Hegel the model of the artwork. She therefore looks in some detail at Hegel's transition from the living organism to artistic beauty in the *Aesthetics*.<sup>32</sup> On her reading, Hegel expects the beautiful object—or subject—to satisfy two criteria, neither of which can be fulfilled, for a priori reasons, by the living organism. The first is what she calls the infinity of the particular object or subject, the second the visibility of the organism's inner unity. We have seen in the first chapter how in Hegel's view the inner unity of the animal organism, in virtue of which it deserves the title of a subject, fails to manifest itself externally in the way it does in the human individual. For this reason, the animal organism fails to satisfy the second criterion identified by Hilmer: its inner unity fails to make itself fully manifest and externally visible. In contrast, Hilmer recognizes that this deficiency is overcome in the human organism in Hegel's view; Hegel states in the *Aesthetics* that because human bodies are covered with skin, through which the 'pulsating heart' can become visible, rather than with feathers, scales or fur, their inner unity and subjectivity becomes externally visible.<sup>33</sup> Hilmer argues further that the human organism nevertheless fails to satisfy Hegel's first criterion: infinity. She does not explain how exactly she understands this term, but the way her argument proceeds makes clear that she has roughly the following in mind: the beautiful object or subject, for Hegel, has to be an 'infinite' subject in the Hegelian sense of the term, that is, an 'I' capable of 'returning into itself', or of conceiving of itself as something purely ideal and distinct from any external manifestation. According to Hilmer, the actual, living human figure—in this respect on par with any other living organism—does not exhibit this kind of infinity. The work of art, in contrast, can fulfill both of Hegel's criteria, Hilmer argues: external visibility of inner unity, and the infinity of pure, ideal self-reference.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, she concludes, the work of art has the potential to be beautiful, while living organisms, even human ones, lack it.

I do not think that Hilmer wishes to deny that actual human individuals possess the capacity of infinite, pure self-reference for Hegel. Rather, her point must be that such infinity cannot manifest itself in sensuous form in actual human individuals—they cannot express this infinity through their bodies. And if such sensuous manifestation of infinite self-reference is a necessary element of beauty, then human individuals cannot be beautiful.

However, contrary to Hilmer's reading, I do not believe that for Hegel the beautiful figure needs to be capable of carrying out some form of infinite, ideal self-reference, or even has to manifest such infinity in sensuous form. Rather, Hegel's statements on beauty in *Enz.*, § 556 and § 557 suggest that all that is required for beauty is a *unity* or *identity* of spirit and nature, or soul and body, an immersion of the soul in the body (or of spirit in nature), from which it does not yet have to have 'returned' or 'withdrawn' into itself. In the beautiful figure, the soul or spirit has externalized itself,



and feels fully at home in this externalization; it has not yet withdrawn from its externality, returned into itself and thereby achieved genuine infinity and subjectivity. Hegel makes this explicit in *Enz.*, § 557, where he states that the beautiful human figure ‘contains the so-called *unity* of nature and spirit—i.e. the *immediate* unity, the form of intuition’. He continues by stating that the beautiful subject is ‘without infinite reflection into itself, without the subjective inwardness of *conscience*’. Essential to beauty is the *unity* of soul and body, rather than the infinite return of the soul into itself.<sup>35</sup>

If this is correct, then we can reject Hilmer’s interpretation of Hegel’s argument. The actual human individual cannot be rejected as a potential bearer of the predicate ‘beautiful’ on the basis of the fact that it falls short of sensuously exhibiting infinite self-reference. Such infinity is *not* essential to beauty on Hegel’s account. Essential to beauty is, rather, the unity of spirit and nature, or of soul and natural body. Such unity, however, is paradigmatically exhibited by the human figure insofar as it has been turned into a sign of the soul, as we have seen in the preceding chapter. Thus, Hilmer does not offer us a reason for rejecting the hypothesis that the actual human figure may have the potential to be genuinely beautiful on Hegel’s account.

Lastly, I turn to Adorno and his discussion of Hegel’s notion of beauty in his *Aesthetic Theory*. Natural beauty plays an important role in Adorno’s aesthetic theory, but it is not my aim to discuss this role in any detail.<sup>36</sup> Instead, I focus on Adorno’s criticism of Hegel’s transition from nature to artistic beauty in the *Aesthetics*. In contrast to the commentators considered so far, Adorno not merely argues that Hegel wishes to restrict beauty proper to art, but also considers this restriction as deeply problematic. Furthermore, on Adorno’s reading, Hegel’s restriction of beauty to the sphere of art implies at the same time a radical exclusion of nature or natural immediacy from beauty.

Two main strains can be distinguished in Adorno’s criticism of Hegel’s conception of beauty, one of which may be called an external line of criticism, another one that may be called a form of internal criticism. Adorno’s external criticism is that Hegel refuses to acknowledge the possibility of a form of beauty in which spirit is not involved; insofar as it is not made by spirit, nature is not capable of bringing about genuine beauty for Hegel.<sup>37</sup> While nature below the level of the animal—plants and inorganic nature—is capable of bringing about phenomena such as regularity, symmetry and harmony, this is not sufficient for genuine beauty according to Hegel. We have seen that even animal nature does not possess the potential to be beautiful in Hegel’s view, even though it comes much closer to it than plants or inanimate nature: animals are unified subjects for Hegel, but they are not reflected or expressed in their bodies in the same way as human beings. The reason for this exclusion of (non-human) nature from the realm of beauty is that for Hegel, beauty resides only in objects that are signs of spirit (peculiar types of signs, as we have seen; in them, the sign and what it signifies are identical). Adorno is right that this idea lies at the very heart of Hegel’s notion of

beauty. If we abandon it, we leave the territory of Hegel's aesthetic theory. Adorno, however, wishes to question this thesis. Against Hegel, he wants to urge a conception of natural beauty as a type of beauty that lies beyond spirit and its characteristic operations of mediation and identification.

Adorno may be right to point out that in restricting beauty to the realm of spirit, Hegel stands in opposition to our intuitions about the possibility of natural beauty. But because this is a form of external criticism, which does not accept Hegel's basic premises but rather questions them, I am not going to pursue it further here. Instead I turn to Adorno's second, immanent critique of Hegel. As we will see, this second critique contains a more subtle version of the first; thus in answering it, we will also make some progress in the direction of addressing Adorno's first, external line of criticism.

Adorno argues that Hegel construes the transition from nature to artistic beauty in the *Aesthetics* in a way that runs counter to Hegel's own methodological premises. Because it is not determined, created or posited by spirit, Hegel dismisses natural beauty as deficient: 'Because natural beauty is not thoroughly ruled and defined by spirit, Hegel considers it preaesthetic'.<sup>38</sup> This deficiency is then supposed to be overcome in the beauty of art, that is, in a form of beauty that is thoroughly created by spirit. Hence art is brought into the world in order to correct a flaw of nature. Adorno here cites the following passage from Hegel's *Aesthetics*:

Thus it is from the deficiencies of immediate reality that the necessity of the beauty of art is derived. The task of art must therefore be firmly established in art's having a calling to display the appearance of life, and especially of spiritual animation (in its freedom, externally too) and to make the external correspond with its concept. Only so is the truth lifted out of its temporal setting, out of its straying away into a series of finites. At the same time it has won an external appearance through which the poverty of nature and prose no longer peeps; it has won an existence worthy of truth.<sup>39</sup>

However, Adorno argues, if this transition from nature to art was to be in accord with properly Hegelian methodology, art would have to be shown to achieve the very goal that immediate reality or nature is implicitly aspiring to, but which it fails to reach. In this case, art could be understood as articulating an immanent critique of nature, that is, a critique that assesses nature by the standards it sets for *itself*, but which it fails to satisfy. Or in other words, in this case, art could be understood as the aesthetic '*Aufhebung*' of nature. Instead, in Hegel's account, art 'corrects' immediate reality or nature simply by producing something new and supposedly better that however does not stand in any continuity with what it is supposed to correct. Immediate reality or nature is exempt from the rule and determination of spirit; artworks, in contrast, are produced and thoroughly determined by spirit. Immediate reality or nature is pre-aesthetic; art is properly beautiful.

This is why no trace of nature proper is left in Hegel's conception of beauty according to Adorno; rather than from an immanent development of nature, artistic beauty emerges simply from an authoritative 'positing' of spirit. Or in other words, the transition from nature to art in Hegel constitutes an *Aufhebung* of the former through the latter only in the sense of a cancellation or negation, rather than in the threefold sense of the term, sublation, preservation and cancellation. Nature is only cancelled in art, rather than also preserved and sublated. Adorno writes: 'In Hegel's transition from nature to art [...] the much touted polysignificance of *Aufhebung* is nowhere to be found. Natural beauty flickers out without a trace of it being recognizable in art beauty'.<sup>40</sup>

According to Adorno, one implication of this lack of continuity in Hegel between nature and art is that the supposed correction of nature through art has a 'transfiguring affirmative purpose'.<sup>41</sup> Art presents a beautiful world, but because this vision is not backed up by any aesthetic potential inherent in immediate reality itself, it cannot possibly become real. Art can merely offer a kind of escape from immediate reality. At the same time, because the vision presented in art cannot possibly become real, it has no critical potential, or does not point to a way in which immediate reality itself might be 'beautified'. In this sense, beautiful art ultimately has an affirmative purpose for Hegel according to Adorno's interpretation.

We can now see how this line of reasoning culminates in a more subtle version of Adorno's external criticism of Hegel mentioned earlier. Adorno here also accuses Hegel of neglecting nature in his conception of beauty. But rather than simply insisting, contrary to Hegel, that non-spiritual nature possesses an aesthetic potential that may not be neglected, he points out that in the present line of criticism, by his very own standards Hegel ought to be concerned with demonstrating a continuity between nature and art such that the latter could be considered as accomplishing the *Aufhebung* of the former. Instead, nature is only cancelled in art. Adorno also relates this criticism to a broader one concerning Hegel's conception of beauty: Hegel seems to shy away from allowing for something like an inherent dialectical development of beauty, Adorno states. Instead, his conception of beauty is static and therefore classicist:

Hegel sacrifices natural beauty to subjective spirit, but subordinates that spirit to a classicism that is external to and incompatible with it, perhaps out of fear of a dialectic that even in the face of the idea of beauty would not come to a halt.<sup>42</sup>

Adorno is right to argue that if art is supposed to correct the flaws found in nature or immediate reality in Hegel's view, such a correction cannot be simply understood as the creation of an alternative world, which does not stand in any continuity with what it is supposed to correct. Rather, such a correction will have to consist in something like an actualization

of a potential inherent in nature or immediate reality. Adorno is wrong in my view, however, in claiming that the transition from nature to artistic beauty in Hegel cannot be understood precisely in those latter terms. Again, I would suggest that Adorno fails to pay sufficient attention to Hegel's crucial distinction between human and non-human nature. In our discussion of *Enz.*, § 558 above, we saw that Hegel holds that art, by representing the human individual, ought to actualize its inherent aesthetic potential. But this idea establishes precisely the continuity between immediate reality and art Adorno claims is missing in Hegel's account. The actual human being in her immediate reality is not properly beautiful, because in her external appearance the presence of brute natural forces may dominate or suppress the manifestation of a unity of spirit and nature. Art, in contrast, can create perfectly beautiful human individuals. Thus art actualizes the inherent aesthetic potential of the human being in its immediate reality. To be sure, there is no aesthetic potential in non-human nature on Hegel's account that could be actualized by art. But the decisive point here is that Hegel's position is not subject to the *immanent* critique that Adorno puts forward. As *Enz.*, § 558 and several other passages quoted above show, Hegel thinks that there is a 'privileged relationship' between art and the human figure: art needs to resort to the human figure in order to express spiritual contents, and in particular to be beautiful, while the aesthetic potential of the human figure can on the other hand be actualized and completed by art. The immediate reality to which art is supposed to provide a correction is first and foremost the actual human individual.

Beautiful art on Hegel's account therefore does not, as Adorno contends, present merely a beautiful alternative world that stands in no continuity with the actual one. Rather, beautiful art presents what actual human individuals *could* be. One might object at this point, however, that this fails to answer Adorno's deeper concern about a lack of continuity between nature and art in Hegel. For the human individual is for Hegel not a part of nature, properly speaking; thus his 'Anthropology' is part of his Philosophy of Spirit, rather than his 'Philosophy of Nature'. But as came out clearly in the preceding chapter, even though human individuals possess the capacity to freely shape and appropriate their first nature to a certain extent and turn it into second nature, this process of appropriation is nevertheless also partly determined by their first nature. Second nature, on Hegel's account, is not created 'from scratch', as it were, but emerges from and in interaction with first nature. It therefore seems legitimate to conceive of the human individual, from Hegel's point of view, as a 'bridge' between nature in Adorno's sense of the term—that is, non-spiritual nature—and art. The human individual possesses the potential to form (her) nature and turn it into a sign of the soul, a unity of spirit and nature; art can actualize this potential and bring the 'idealization' of nature to completion. Hence whereas it must without doubt be conceded that for Hegel there can be no beauty in non-spiritual nature, nature both in its first and second forms nevertheless

form an essential part of beauty for him, even of artistic beauty. More generally, we can say that Adorno's suggestion that Hegel's conception of beauty on the whole betrays a hostile attitude towards nature is misguided. It is true that there can be no beauty for Hegel where spirit is not involved; but, at least at this stage of our argument, it looks as if there can be no beauty where nature is not involved either.

In contrast to the other authors discussed above, Adorno presents his arguments in a critical mode. He tries to show not merely that beauty is exclusive to art in Hegel's view, but that this constitutes a genuine, internal problem for Hegel's position. However, it has turned out that we can reject Adorno's arguments on similar grounds as the other arguments considered earlier in the chapter. Like those other authors, Adorno fails to appreciate the important difference that holds for Hegel between human nature and the rest of nature in respect to aesthetics. By taking into account the aesthetic potential that Hegel ascribes to the actual, living human individual, we can reject Adorno's claim that for Hegel there is no continuity between nature and art in aesthetic respect, such that beauty is strictly exclusive to art. On this basis, we can also refute Adorno's deeper criticism that there is no place for nature in Hegel's conception of beauty.

## CONCLUSION

By considering several paragraphs from the *Encyclopedia* and corresponding passages from the *Aesthetics*, I introduced a novel interpretation of Hegel's conception of beauty. According to this interpretation, the primary and paradigmatic beautiful object for Hegel is the human individual. Art is nevertheless important for the creation of beauty on this view, as it actualizes the human aesthetic potential by representing perfectly beautiful human individuals. In the second part of the chapter, we looked at several readings of Hegel that stand in opposition to this interpretation and its implications, as they maintain that for Hegel beauty is necessarily exclusive to art. I suggested that these readings can be rejected on the basis of the results reached so far. In the next chapter, I shall develop the interpretation of Hegel's notion of beauty introduced above in more detail, in particular by addressing the question of what the value of beauty consists in according to the present account.

## NOTES

1. The list of those who hold that beauty is necessarily exclusive to art in Hegel's view comprises a great number of influential commentators on Hegel's aesthetics: Theodor W. Adorno, Annemarie Gethmann-Siebert, Stephen Bungay, William Desmond, Stephen Houlgate. I discuss some of their arguments in detail below.

2. VAI, 151/LAI, 111.
3. Ibid.
4. Aesth. 1826A, 74.
5. Ibid., 145.
6. Enz., § 558.
7. Enz., § 558.
8. Enz., § 556.
9. Enz., § 558.
10. VAI, 227–28/LAI, 172–73.
11. Ibid., 199–202/150–52, 204–206/154–56, 217–20/164–66; Aesth. 1823, 78–82; Aesth. 1826, 38–39.
12. VAI, 206/LAI, 155.
13. In chapter 6, I discuss in detail in what sense the artist becomes a ‘free artist’ for Hegel by making the human figure his subject matter.
14. VAI, 21–22/LAI, 433–34.
15. Aesth. 1823, 36.
16. Ibid., 157–58.
17. Aesth. 1826A, 146.
18. In chapter 6 I discuss in more detail to what extent the term ‘imitation’ is appropriate here in Hegel’s view, by comparing the traditional (that is, classical) artist’s relation to (human) nature as a source of artistic inspiration with that of the modern artist.
19. Bungay 1984, 40; see also 38, 45.
20. See for instance Houlgate 2005, XV for a succinct statement of this line of thought drawing on the notion of human freedom.
21. Gethmann-Sieft 1984, 295.
22. Ibid., 256–64.
23. Bungay 1984, 42.
24. Bungay 1984, 41.
25. Desmond 1986, 8.
26. Ibid., 9.
27. It is slightly odd, though, that Desmond restricts the Ideal to the sphere of art with so little consideration, even though even though he recognizes that in the human figure, ‘the self is also embodied in sensuous form in Hegel’s view’ (ibid., 8). It is not clear why Desmond does not consider the possibility that the human figure may be a worthy candidate for the Ideal on Hegel’s account, since in it spirit and the sensuous form a unity as well. See also ibid., 145.
28. There is a certain ambiguity in this argument: are the objects that are mediated by spirit the objects represented in the works of art, or rather the works of art themselves? Both can be legitimately called sensuous objects mediated or made by spirit, but each option means quite different things. The defenders of the argument under consideration do not always make entirely clear which of the two options they have in mind. However, I do not think this issue is crucial for our present purposes.
29. See also Geulen 2002, 36–37, for a summary of another version of this line of argument.
30. It must be noted, however, that the commentators quoted above in general prefer to speak of beauty being constituted by a unity of spirit and ‘sensuousness’ or ‘sensuous form’ for Hegel, rather than of spirit and *nature*. A sensuous form is anything that can be sensuously perceived; it does not need to be *natural* in any more narrow sense. However, the paragraphs from the *Encyclopedia* discussed above suggest that for Hegel beauty consists in a unity of spirit and *nature*; beauty is present where *natural* immediacy has been integrated into a sign of spirit. Hence the sensuous form in which spirit is to

manifest itself in order for beauty to be present has to be understood, more narrowly, as a *natural* form (in *Enz.*, § 558, Hegel states explicitly that art has to orient itself towards the given forms of *nature*).

31. I do not claim to have done justice to the complexity of the different positions developed by Houlgate, Gethmann-Siefert, Bungay and Desmond at this point. Rather, my aim is just to shed some doubt on a general tendency in the literature towards prematurely excluding beauty within Hegel's account from the realm of (human) nature altogether, on the basis of the assumption that it is the exclusive privilege of art to produce spiritually mediated sensuousness. This overlooks the decisive fact that for Hegel, there is a creature in which nature and spirit 'overlap' or come together, which possesses the capacity to mediate or spiritualize its natural mode of existence: the human being.
32. See Hilmer 1997, 79–86.
33. As Hilmer points out, this argument of Hegel's is hardly satisfactory: it is not clear why one kind of organic matter should be more suitable to express the inner soul than another. I argued in chapter 1 that at this point we need to interpolate Hegel's arguments from his discussion of the human soul in the *Encyclopedia* in order to render support to his thesis.
34. I cannot pursue in any detail here the question of how the work of art is capable of satisfying these two criteria on Hilmer's account. For Hilmer, it is essential to the work of art that it constitutes an element within a relation of self-reference: the spectator can recognize herself in the artwork, or sees herself reflected in it, and it is only in virtue of this relation to its potential spectators that something deserves to be called a genuine work of art. Hence the artwork constitutes one of the *relata* within a relation of 'infinite' self-reference; this relation is brought about by the spectator vis-à-vis the work of art. See Hilmer 1997, 40–41.
35. Desmond also wants to relate beauty in Hegel to 'infinite inwardness'; he writes that

[t]rue beauty [for Hegel], to satisfy infinite inwardness, must be both objective and yet concretize an infinite richness. Thus true beauty would seem to have to be more than a merely finite whole, but rather a whole that cannot be exhausted in a bounded set of finite predicates. (Desmond 1986, 118)

The *Encyclopedia* at least suggests otherwise.

36. For such a detailed discussion, see Figal 1977.
37. *ÄT*, 116/*AT*, 97. See also *ibid.*, 119/99, where Adorno writes:

Hegel's philosophy fails vis-à-vis beauty: Because he equates reason and the real through the quintessence of the mediations, he hypostatizes the subjective preformation of the existing as the absolute; thus for him the nonidentical only figures as a restraint on subjectivity rather than that he determines the experience of the nonidentical as the telos and emancipation of the aesthetic subject. Progressive dialectical aesthetics becomes necessary to critique even Hegel's aesthetics.

Manfred Frank quotes this passage with approval in his study *Der unendliche Mangel an Sein*, in which he reconstructs a line of criticism against Hegelian metaphysics that connects Schelling, Feuerbach and Marx. This criticism is similar to Adorno's critique of Hegel's conception of beauty; the key claim of both is that Hegel denies or suppresses the essential presence of nature or immediacy. See Frank 1975, 29.

- 38. ÄT, 119/AT, 98.
- 39. Ibid., 118/ 98.
- 40. Ibid., 118–19/98.
- 41. Ibid., 118/98.
- 42. Ibid., 119/99.



### 3 The Value of Beauty, Aesthetic Experience and the Aesthetic Human Ideal

In the preceding two chapters, I introduced an interpretation of Hegel's notion of beauty based on a juxtaposition of Hegel's 'Anthropology' and *Lectures on Aesthetics*. I provided evidence for this interpretation from Hegel's 'Anthropology', his discussion of art in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences* and from his *Lectures on Aesthetics*. The suggested interpretation is at odds with the predominant reading of Hegel's notion of beauty, in particular of his stance on the question of whether beauty is limited to the sphere of art. In chapter 2, I addressed the major arguments offered by commentators in support of the predominant view that Hegel takes beauty to be exclusive to art, and suggested how they might be refuted. As sketched in the introduction, however, I do not consider the defense of my interpretation of Hegel's notion of beauty to be complete at this point. For even if there is plenty of *prima facie* evidence for my interpretation, and even if some of the major arguments that seem to speak against it can be refuted, one might still be disinclined to accept it. The upshot of my interpretation is that for Hegel the primary and paradigmatic instance of a beautiful object is the human figure considered as a sign of its inner spirit. However, if stated in this way, this reading may appear objectionable for the reason that it makes art seem aesthetically subordinate to human nature—but this surely cannot be Hegel's view, given the crucial role he assigns to art in the creation of beauty. In the second part of this chapter, I address this worry by showing that even though beautiful art is dependent on human nature according to the interpretation suggested here, it does not follow that it is subordinate to it.

In the first part of the chapter I show that the present interpretation yields a comprehensive Hegelian account of the value of beauty and its experience that revolves around the notion of the self-signifying sign. I suggest that the frequently employed contrast between Hegel's 'objectivist' and Kant's 'subjectivist' approach to beauty needs to be qualified, as Hegel's account, too, possesses an important subjectivist strand.

## AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE AND THE VALUE OF BEAUTY: A HEGELIAN ACCOUNT

It is often said that Hegel rejects Kant's subjectivist aesthetics. Kai Hammermeister for instance writes:

Far from falling back onto Kant's subjective foundation of aesthetics, [. . .] Hegel criticizes it as untenable. To concentrate on sensibility and imagination in an aesthetic theory means to remain stuck in the subjective and fail to make any claims about the work of art itself. Thus, the judgment of taste remains superficial.<sup>1</sup>

The central notion of Kant's aesthetics is that of aesthetic judgment, or the judgment of taste. A judgment of taste does not consist, for Kant, in the ascription of a predicate to an object, like an ordinary cognitive judgment, but rather in an extended, playful, free activity of our cognitive faculties, the imagination and the understanding. This activity is pleasant, and the experience of such pleasure—which is a form of non-sensuous pleasure, because it involves our higher cognitive faculties—is itself an essential part of the basis of our aesthetic judgments. When we say of an object that it is beautiful, part of what this means is that it arouses this peculiar kind of pleasure in the play of our cognitive faculties in us. Thus our own subjective attitude towards the beautiful object, or the effect it has on us, is itself an essential part of its beauty for Kant.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to this approach, it is often said, Hegel focuses his analysis on the beautiful object itself. Beauty, for Hegel, is an objective quality, rather than partly grounded in the spectator's reaction to the beautiful object.<sup>3</sup>

I do not think that this contrast between Kant's and Hegel's approaches to beauty is entirely justified. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Hegel defines the beautiful shape in the following way in the *Encyclopedia*:

As *immediate* (—the moment of the finitude of art), the shape of this knowledge [. . .] is the concrete *intuition* and representation of the spirit which is absolute *in itself* as the *Ideal*. In this Ideal—the concrete shape born of subjective spirit—natural immediacy is only a *sign* of the Idea, it is so transfigured by the informing spirit for the expression of the Idea, that nothing else is shown in the shape;—the shape of *beauty*.<sup>4</sup>

What should give us pause here is that Hegel speaks of a specific kind of 'intuition' that is associated with the shape of beauty. In fact, the passage can even be read as stating that for Hegel the shape of beauty *is*, strictly speaking, an intuition. This would then suggest that in some sense the spectator's perception of the beautiful object—some form of sensuous perception or

intuition—is essential to the object’s beauty itself in Hegel’s view. If this was the case, then it might turn out that Hegel’s conception of beauty is after all closer to Kant’s than is often assumed. In Kant, the specific kind of pleasant experience that a spectator undergoes when perceiving a beautiful object is constitutive of the object’s beauty. It is true that Hegel’s analysis of beauty, in contrast, starts from the objective qualities of the beautiful object itself (which, as we have seen, is essentially a self-signifying unity of inner spirit and outer natural body). However, I would suggest that in Hegel’s view, too, the value and significance of the property of embodying a self-signifying sign comes into view only when and insofar as this quality is being perceived or intuited by a subject. In this respect, the property of beauty has a subjectivist strand in Hegel: it is only fully present from the perspective of a perceiving subject.

To see why this is so, we need to bring into view again one of the peculiarities of Hegel’s understanding of beauty as developed so far. As we have seen, for Hegel the paradigmatic beautiful object is in fact not an object at all, but a subject, a human individual. This subject embodies a unity of inner and outer, and in virtue of doing so, it can on the one hand be considered a self-signifying sign. But on the other hand, as a self-signifying sign, it thereby also becomes the subject of a certain kind of experience on Hegel’s account: such a subject experiences itself as unified with its own natural, external body; it ‘feels at home’ in its idealized, appropriated body, or has ceased to consider the body as something alien. In describing this experience of unity, Hegel often draws on the term ‘reconciliation’. Thus in *Enz.*, § 561, he writes: ‘In this permeation (*Erfüllung*), *reconciliation* appears [. . .] in such a way that it is immediately accomplished in the subjective self-consciousness, which is thus secure and cheerful within itself [. . .].’<sup>5</sup> The beautiful figure is a subjective self-consciousness in whom spirit and nature, or spirit and natural body, are reconciled with each other. By speaking of *reconciliation* here rather than simply an original unity, Hegel presumably wishes to draw our attention to the fact that the unity of spirit and nature exhibited by the beautiful figure is not an immediate one, but accomplished at least in part through the idealizing labor of spirit, through which the natural body is being appropriated and spirit and natural body are being unified. In being reconciled with its own natural body, the beautiful subject feels secure and cheerful. This state of reconciliation with one’s own natural body is described in more detail in the following passage from the *Aesthetics*:

Thus it belongs to the Ideal that it is in the sensuous world at the same time enclosed within itself, that spirit sets its foot into the sensuous, but draws it back to itself, relying on itself, free, enjoying itself as it is united with itself in the external, being sensuously blissful in itself, finding itself in the external, rejoicing in itself, letting the tone of blissfulness resound in everything, no matter how much it may disperse itself, never losing itself, always remaining with itself.<sup>6</sup>

Being in the state of reconciliation that is embodied by the beautiful figure means to be 'secure and cheerful', to be 'free', to 'enjoy oneself', to be 'sensuously blissful in oneself', to 'rejoice in oneself'. Such bliss, cheerfulness or enjoyment, then, constitutes the value of beauty from the point of view of the beautiful subject on Hegel's account.<sup>7</sup>

But this blissful experience undergone by the beautiful subject itself is complemented by a similarly pleasant experience on the side of the spectator of the beautiful subject. To the spectator, the individual who embodies a unity of inner and outer presents itself as a special kind of sign: a self-signifying sign, or a sign that manifests itself, rather than expressing something other than that is distinct from it. On Hegel's account, the self-signifying sign is to be distinguished essentially from other signifying entities, in particular from the symbol. In order to recapitulate this distinction, it will be helpful to briefly return to some passages from the *Aesthetics* that we discussed in the preceding chapter. The passages are taken from Hegel's account of classical beauty; they show again how closely the quality of beauty is associated with the relation between human body and soul for Hegel.

Subjective spirituality [. . .] here has the power to show itself in its appearance. Determined more closely, this can only be the human appearance, because only in it can the spiritual reveal itself. It is here no longer symbolic, but the appearance of the spirit, the determination of the spirit, its stepping outside into existence. [. . .] [T]he body is therefore not a mere symbol of the spirit, but the spirit is immediately present for others in the body. [. . .] Because in the human shape as in a sensuous mode of spirit, the body is no longer a symbol, it does not express something other, does not mean something external, but its meaning appears on its surface itself. In the symbol, only a part corresponds to its meaning. This is not so in the human body.<sup>8</sup>

The perfect unification of the soul and the body or the Ideal: classical art or beauty. [. . .] The meaning has become self-contained (*selbstständig*) for itself; this self-contained meaning is the free spiritual individuality [. . .]. This shape (*Gestalt*) which has been formed (*umgebildet*) and created by spirit immediately has its meaning in itself, such that here the expression is immediately the spiritual (*das Geistige*). [This] shape does not present something else in addition, as it is the case in the symbolic. In the human shape the spiritual appears immediately; this is the true permeation (*Durchdringung*) of the spiritual through the natural. [. . .] [T]he spiritual is the dominant element (*das Herrschende*) in the natural, the spiritual is what manifests itself in the body; this is the foundation of classical beauty.<sup>9</sup>

Hegel here in both of the quotes employs several formulations in order to contrast symbolic signification with the kind of signification that is

characteristic of the beautiful shape, the human body. He writes that in the body, 'the spirit is immediately present for others'; the body 'does not express something other, does not mean something external, but its meaning appears on its surface itself'; in the body, 'the meaning has become self-contained for itself'; the body 'has its meaning in itself'; the body 'does not present something else in addition'. In contrast, the symbol 'expresses something other, something external'; in the symbol, 'only a part corresponds to its meaning'; the symbol 'presents something else in addition'. This is in accord with the account of symbolic signification outlined in chapter 1 of this volume: symbolic signification for Hegel always involves a partial difference and a partial similarity between the symbol and what it symbolizes. This difference between the sign and its meaning has been overcome in the self-signifying sign. Because of the essential difference between the symbol and what it symbolizes, the symbol is always merely an imperfect substitute for what it symbolizes, a mere proxy. The essence of the symbol, one might say, is to stand in for something it is not; the symbol's 'meaningfulness' comes at the price of this deficiency. In contrast, the self-signifying sign is not deficient in the same way, for here the meaning has become self-contained; the sign means only itself, or manifests itself, rather than something else in addition or something external. That is to say, where we sensuously perceive or intuit the self-signifying human sign, we immediately intuit the sign *as well as* its meaning. We do not need to interpret the self-signifying sign in order to understand it, because its meaning immediately 'appears on its surface'. But the self-signifying sign, furthermore, is an embodiment of spirit, or of the soul. Thus in the self-signifying sign, we can immediately intuit spirit or the soul itself, rather than merely something that points to or expresses spirit, or that gives evidence of its presence. We are immediately confronted with spirit itself, rather than merely with a symbol of spirit, in short.

In Hegel's view, this means that we, as spiritual creatures, feel satisfied when we perceive a self-signifying sign, as it immediately reflects our own spiritual nature. In the beautiful figure, Hegel writes, 'the artist's genius and the spectator are at home, with their own sense and sensation, satisfied and liberated'.<sup>10</sup> When Hegel speaks of liberation here, he presumably means liberation from 'otherness'; as spirit is immediately present in the self-signifying sign, we spiritual creatures do not perceive it as something other or alien, but as of our own kind. This perception of sameness in the other—of spirit in nature—is for Hegel the essential characteristic of the experience of beauty or of aesthetic experience, I would suggest. In fact, precisely what the value and significance of the self-signifying spiritual-sensuous sign consists in is bound to elude us unless we bring into view the fact that it affords this kind of experience. However, the fact that it is of value and significance is not accidental to the quality of beauty, but essential to it. In this sense, a self-signifying sign is beautiful partly in virtue of affording its spectator a certain kind of satisfying, liberating experience. In other words, a self-signifying sign is beautiful only in the eyes of a spiritual subject who perceives it as a naturally

embodied spiritual being, an 'other' of its own kind. Beauty involves, for Hegel, necessarily a cognitive relation between spiritual creatures—more specifically, between spiritual creatures that are both spiritual and natural.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, he can say that beauty *is* an intuition.

The result that beauty in Hegel bears an essential relation to a perceiving subject is opposed to the account given by Rüdiger Bubner of the place and status of aesthetic experience in Hegel's aesthetics. Bubner argues that the experience of the spectator has an essential place in Hegel's aesthetics only in the sphere of symbolic art, or in the sphere of the symbol more generally.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the beautiful figure, in which sensuous form and spiritual content are fully united, the symbol merely points to a spiritual content, which however is not fully present in it, which transcends it. Because of this incapacity of the symbolic form to fully capture and contain its content, Bubner argues, the spectator is called on to actively construct the content in light of the form—it is he who has to bridge the gap between the two. Bubner writes: 'The symbol, on the other hand, inevitably brings subjectivity into play because the lack of any unified "work", understood as a kind of full spiritual self-presence, must be compensated through the express achievements of human imagination'.<sup>13</sup> No such compensation is necessary in the case of the beautiful figure, in contrast, because here the object's meaning is fully present and contained in it. Hence on Bubner's reading of Hegel, the symbol, as opposed to the beautiful figure, is necessarily perceived or experienced by a spectator. The beautiful figure or work, in contrast, stands self-contained and without challenging the spectator to complement or compensate its deficiency. However, in my view, Bubner overlooks the fact that even the beautiful figure, in spite of its full spiritual self-presence, reveals its beauty only in the eyes of a spiritual subject who perceives it. It is true that its perceiver does not compensate for a deficiency or imperfection in the beautiful figure, as in the case of the symbol, where the perceiver has to bridge the gap between the symbol and its intended meaning. Nevertheless, the significance and value, and hence the beauty, of the self-signifying sign can be brought into view only from the perspective of a sympathetic spiritual creature.<sup>14</sup>

This result makes it possible to bring into sharper relief the contrast between Hegel's position and the position of those who take the paradigmatic instance of beauty to be *natural* beauty. In chapter 2, we considered Theodor W. Adorno's influential criticism of Hegel's notion of beauty: according to Adorno, Hegel illegitimately tries to exclude nature altogether from his conception of beauty by restricting beauty to works of art, artificial products of human creation. I argued that Adorno's criticism is misguided, insofar as it neglects the fact that nature constitutes an essential element in beauty according to Hegel. Nevertheless, Adorno is right to the extent that, in Hegel's view, there can be no beauty without the participation of the forming power of spirit, and without spirit becoming manifest as a self-signifying sign. Hegel's aesthetic theory has a bias in favor of *subjects* as

the primary instances of aesthetic excellence. This became obvious already in chapter 1, where we looked at Hegel's account of the aesthetic hierarchy of natural objects: those who deserve to be called subjects are aesthetically superior to those who don't, but those who can fully integrate their inner soul with their outer body hold the supreme position in aesthetic respect. One might therefore say that for Hegel, in contrast to Adorno, the experience of beauty is essentially an experience of sameness. Beauty is present for Hegel where we find our own spiritual nature reflected in a self-signifying sign, an immediate embodiment of spirit. In contrast, for Adorno, the experience of beauty is ultimately an experience of otherness or 'nonidentity': Adorno takes beauty to be found primarily in the 'trace of the nonidentical in things under the spell of universal identity'.<sup>15</sup>

## ART AND THE AESTHETIC HUMAN IDEAL

In the preceding chapter, I considered different arguments intended to show that for Hegel, beauty is restricted to works of art. I suggested that these arguments can be rejected in light of the results reached in chapter 1. Most of them neglect the essential difference that holds for Hegel between the human individual and all other living organisms in aesthetic respect. Only the human individual possesses genuine aesthetic potential for Hegel, because only in human beings can the body be appropriated or idealized and turned into a self-signifying unity of inner spirit and outer body. In fact, the thesis I have argued for so far is that, for Hegel, the human individual is the primary and paradigmatic beautiful object. As we saw in chapter 2, on this view, works of art are beautiful in virtue of representing perfectly beautiful human individuals. The worry that may be raised at this point is that this thesis seems to assign art a place aesthetically subordinate to human nature; this, however, does not seem to do justice to the undeniable fact that art plays a crucial, indispensable role in the creation of beauty for Hegel. In order to alleviate this worry, I now want to consider again the question of how the actual, living human individual is related to artistic beauty according to the present interpretation of Hegel's position.

We observed in the preceding chapter that Enz., § 558 seems to suggest that the task of art—in particular of beautiful art—lies for Hegel simply in the *imitation* of the beautiful, spiritually meaningful figures it finds readily in reality, in particular the human figure. However, I also cited passages from the *Aesthetics* in which Hegel expresses skepticism concerning the potential presence of genuinely beautiful exemplars among the actual, living human individuals. We therefore concluded that in Hegel's view, beautiful art finds inspiration and guidance in the actual human individual, while at the same time actualizing the beauty that is only *potentially* present in living human individuals.

On this view, beautiful art is to a certain extent dependent on the actual, living human individual: in order to be beautiful, art has to let itself be guided by what it finds in human nature. The notion that beautiful art depends in this way on actual human nature is expressed repeatedly by Hegel. In *Enz.*, § 558, he writes that art ‘needs for the expression of spiritual content, the given forms of nature together with their meaning, which art must discern and appropriate’; among these forms, the human form is said to be the ‘supreme’ one. The dependence is made even more explicit in the following passages from the *Aesthetics*:

According to the usual view, however, this adoption and imitation [i.e. ‘that art has imitated the human form’] seems accidental, whereas we must maintain that art, once developed to its maturity, must of necessity produce its representations in the form of man’s external appearance because only therein does the spirit acquire its adequate existence in sensuous and natural material.<sup>16</sup>

And similarly:

From this point of view one can also consider the notion that art has imitated the human shape, which it has found (*vorhand*), such that this imitation appears as a contingency (*Zufälligkeit*). But the human shape is the only necessary and possible one.<sup>17</sup>

According to these passages, art necessarily has to let itself be guided by the human form, a given form of nature, if it is to develop to maturity by becoming properly beautiful art. In order to be beautiful, art has to represent the beautiful human individual; hence art depends on what is given in human nature in order for it to be beautiful, and therefore mature.

However, such dependence may appear less objectionable if one considers that it does not imply subordination. For whereas the actual human individual on the one hand functions as a model for the creation of artistic beauty, the beautiful human figure as created in art on the other hand purports to function as a model, in a different sense, for the actual human individual. Human individuals not only fail to actualize their aesthetic potential, they are moreover *faulty* or *deficient* in failing to do so. Hegel brings this out by using a clearly normative vocabulary in order to describe the state of the individual who fails to actualize his aesthetic potential:

The human individual, the existing human being, is the Idea, and he would be the Ideal if only he existed in accord with the Idea; but he is not only that, but also a naturally existing human being. As the concept steps into existence, it thereby gets involved in external necessity [. . .], and the natural begins to be no longer appropriate to the Ideal. Illness leaves traces here and there on the body; wounds and the like



impoverish the existence of the concept. Furthermore, the expression of the spiritual and the merely natural are distinct. Pocks, excessive hair, spots in the face are part of the merely natural organization, not of the spiritual soul; passions which are passed on within families generate a particular expression; climate, region (*Himmelsstrich*), inner disruption (*Zwiespalt*), debauchery, result in distortions against which the Ideal is indifferent. We have to eat, drink, with a certain frequency, to a certain time. But in the drama, even if it spans a whole day, we do not let the protagonists have a meal, even though they need not go hungry either. Of a portrait painter, who is supposed to capture a certain physiognomy on the canvas, one may in general say deprecatingly that he embellishes his model. But if he is a true painter, an artist, he has to flatter. In the present face, he has to leave aside all signs of externality such as fine facial hair and other fine determinations, or types of skin, which belong to the sphere of contingency and faulty (*bedürftigen*) life.<sup>18</sup>

The existing human individual is said to be ‘impoverished’ and ‘faulty’, he needs to be ‘purified’ through artistic representation, this representation ‘flatters’ him. These faults or deficiencies are overcome by the beautiful figure as presented in art. Hence, the artistically presented human figure implicitly makes a statement about what the human individual, ideally, ought to be like: art presents a normative ideal of the human individual, an aesthetic human ideal. It therefore does not seem legitimate to consider art as subordinate to human nature on this account. Rather, it seems best to speak of a complex relation of mutual dependence: art depends on human nature for inspiration, but on the other hand it presents an aesthetically idealized version of the actual human individual. Thus art is guided by human nature, but human nature reaches its aesthetic perfection in art; and according to the vision presented in beautiful art, human perfection just is aesthetic perfection.

One question that suggests itself at this point is which artistic medium might be most adequate for presenting the aesthetic human ideal. There are reasons to believe that this would have to be the medium of sculpture. Stephen Houlgate has shown that for Hegel, the art of sculpture essentially revolves around the human body, which it uses as its primary medium to represent the embodiment of human—or, in fact, divine—freedom.<sup>19</sup> On Houlgate’s reading, the sculptural human body therefore exhibits a particularly pure, ideal form of beauty: it presents a self-contained, serene unity of spiritual content (freedom) and material form (the sculptural body). However, as Houlgate also points out, the ideal sculpture depicts for Hegel a static and motionless individual, not involved in any movement, action or interaction with other individuals. But our discussion in chapter 1 provides reason to believe that only a human body involved in action can lay claim to exhibiting genuine beauty from Hegel’s point of view. For we have seen there that it is not the human body as such that embodies

a unity of inner and outer for Hegel, but the human body as a bearer of habits, or as involved in (habitual) action. This would seem to suggest that for Hegel the primary artistic medium for the representation of beautiful figures must be one that is capable of presenting human individuals as involved in action. The most likely candidate for such a medium would be drama. This line of thought in fact finds some support in the *Aesthetics*. Thus Hegel writes, for instance, that 'it is primarily the spiritual which is the object of art, and it is spirit only as stepping outside into finitude, as activity (*Tätigkeit*)'.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Hegel describes the drama as the work of art 'in which the beautiful is presented in its highest development'.<sup>21</sup> In the next chapter, I demonstrate in greater detail that on Hegel's account, the aesthetic human ideal is in fact presented in its most developed form in the medium of drama.

According to the interpretation developed so far, the aesthetic human ideal presented in beautiful art pertains not merely to the external appearance of a human individual, but to the way her body, or more generally her first nature, relates to her inner spirit, and vice versa. This means that it makes sense to raise the question of how this aesthetic human ideal presented in beautiful art might relate to other normative human ideals involving a particular conception of how a human individual's soul ought to relate to his first nature or bodily existence. In fact, if we briefly return to Hegel's 'Anthropology' at this point, we can find some evidence here that from Hegel's point of view there is potential for a *conflict* between the human aesthetic ideal as presented in beautiful art on the one hand, and other normative conceptions of the human individual on the other. For Hegel, the actual human soul, the soul as fully united with the body—the soul that can potentially lay claim to being a beautiful figure—is not the final point in the development of the human spirit; spirit cannot rest at the state of being unified with the body. Rather, this unity has to be broken up again, and spirit has to withdraw from, or oppose itself to it. It is only by carrying out this act of negation that spirit ultimately assumes a crucial dimension of subjectivity, Hegel argues.<sup>22</sup> However, once spirit has withdrawn from its unity with the body, it can no longer embody or instantiate the aesthetic human ideal—for this ideal is present precisely where such unity obtains. In fact, in one passage Hegel states that spirit can withdraw from the state of being unified with the body only insofar as this unity is never complete or fully actualized in the first place:

The soul's pervasion of its bodiliness considered in the two previous Paragraphs is not *absolute*, does not completely sublate the difference between soul and body. [. . .] Something of bodiliness remains, therefore, purely organic and consequently withdrawn from the power of the soul, so that the soul's pervasion of its body is only one side of the body. The soul, when it comes to feel this limitation of its power, reflects itself into itself and expels bodiliness as something *alien* to it.<sup>23</sup>

This seems to suggest that a living human individual who embodies an undisrupted, perfect unity of soul and bodiliness, and might therefore count as an instantiation of the aesthetic human ideal, will be kept, precisely for this reason, from developing a dimension of subjectivity—the capacity to withdraw from one’s bodily existence and distinguish oneself from it—which Hegel takes to be a crucial aspect of the human spirit. Thus aesthetic human excellence seems to be incompatible with potential other human excellences that are grounded in the human capacity for subjectivity, distance towards one’s embodied, natural existence, and so on. Aesthetic excellence implies a unity of spirit and body for Hegel, but precisely this unity will have to be left behind if the human individual is to fully actualize her potential as a spiritual creature. Hence whereas the actual human individual is flawed when considered in light of the aesthetic human ideal, the aesthetic human ideal, on the other hand, is deficient when considered from the point of view of the normative, teleological conception of the human being developed in Hegel’s ‘Anthropology’. According to this conception, the human being is destined to become a spiritual creature, and thus to develop into a genuine self. The individual who embodies the aesthetic human ideal necessarily lacks this dimension of subjectivity. One might thus say that the perfectly beautiful human figure embodies an aesthetic ideal, but not really a properly *human* ideal. In other words, the perfectly beautiful human figure does not embody what human individuals ought to be like, given their inherent *telos*—it offers a vision of aesthetic perfection, but not a valid vision of human perfection.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, the aesthetic ideal on the one hand purports to be a human ideal, an ideal of what human beings ideally ought to be like. Yet on the other hand, it implies an impoverished conception of the human being. It is this tension that in Hegel’s account is ultimately responsible for the fact that artistic beauty of the form discussed above is not tenable as an artistic paradigm. In this form, artistic beauty both seeks inspiration in human nature and makes normative claims pertaining to it. Beautiful art, understood in this way, both relies on and asserts the continuity between human nature and art.

## CONCLUSION

I have now completed my defense of the thesis that the primary and paradigmatic beautiful object for Hegel is the human body considered as a sign of its inner soul. I have argued that this does not imply that art does not play a crucial, indeed indispensable function in the creation of genuine beauty. For on this account, art is essential for actualizing the aesthetic potential that is realized only to a limited degree in actual human beings. In fact, by realizing this potential, art not only creates beautiful figures—or in short, becomes beautiful art—but also presents an aesthetic human ideal, an aesthetic vision of human perfection. What emerges here is a strong, ambitious conception of artistic beauty according to which art, in being beautiful, reaches out to

the actual, living human individual and makes normative claims pertaining to it. I have also shown that the present reading of Hegel yields an original account of the value of beauty and of the nature of aesthetic experience. What remains to be done in the next chapter is to make the interpretation developed here more concrete, by considering instances of beauty—that is, of beautiful human figures—which can be found in actual works of art on Hegel’s account.

## NOTES

1. Hammermeister 2002, 93–94.
2. See KU, 203–39.
3. This is also Adorno’s view; see for instance *ÄT*, 141/*AT*, 120. Adorno here speaks of ‘Hegel’s much more modern ambition of knowing art from within rather than in terms of its subjective constitution from without’ (*ibid.*).
4. *Enz.*, § 556, translation altered: I replaced the phrase ‘the *implicitly* absolute spirit’ by the phrase ‘the spirit which is absolute *in itself*’. As we have seen in the preceding chapter, the expressions ‘Ideal’ and ‘beautiful shape’ or ‘beautiful figure’ are interchangeable in Hegel.
5. I have altered the translation: Wallace/Miller/Inwood translate ‘*Erfüllung*’ as ‘inspiration’. However, in my view the term ‘permeation’ brings out Hegel’s intention more clearly, as what he means is the permeation of the natural body by spirit.
6. *Aesth.* 1823, 82.
7. We will see in chapter 5 that the blissful reconciliation with one’s natural body experienced by the beautiful subject stands in direct opposition to the experience of the pain of inner division.
8. *Aesth.* 1823, 157–58.
9. *Aesth.* 1826A, 146.
10. *Enz.*, § 562, Remark.
11. This brings to mind Kant’s statement that beauty exists only for human beings, that is, for creatures that are both spiritual and sensuous: see KU, 210.
12. See Bubner 2007, 216–30.
13. *Ibid.*, 226.
14. For an argument against Bubner’s reading of Hegel, which is somewhat similar to mine in spirit, see Hilmer 1997, 41, fn. 65.
15. *ÄT*, 114/*AT*, 95.
16. *VII*, 21–22/*LAI*, 433–34.
17. *Aesth.* 1823, 157–58.
18. *Aesth.* 1826, 38–39. Hegel here uses the terms ‘Idea’ and ‘Concept’ interchangeably.
19. Houlgate 2007a.
20. *Aesth.* 1823, 83.
21. *Aesth.* 1826, 49.
22. *Enz.*, § 412.
23. *Ibid.*, Addition.
24. It is therefore misleading when Robert Wicks equates the aesthetic ideal in Hegel with the ideal of humanity. Wicks writes:

By expressing the identity between humanity and the rest of what is, ideal art conveys a feeling of reconciliation and of “being at home” in the world. In sum, Hegel’s theory of ideal art holds that, through the image of a perfect human being, the most beautiful art primarily expresses a state of

consciousness characteristic of the members of a completely rational and psychologically healthy society. Such an image would be calm and peaceful, and would express the condition of being what one ought to be. (Wicks 1994, 117)

It is true that the aesthetic human ideal projects a sense of being at home in the world (more specifically, being at home in one's natural body), and of calm, peacefulness or satisfaction, as Hegel would put it—however, it is precisely not an image of 'what one ought to be' *qua* human being.

## 4 The Beautiful Character and Its Limits

I have argued in the preceding chapters that for Hegel, the primary and paradigmatic instance of a beautiful object is the human individual. However, I also tried to show that art nevertheless plays an indispensable role in the creation of genuine beauty for Hegel. For as the perfectly beautiful human being cannot be found in reality, it has to be represented in art. Moreover, in doing so, art represents an aesthetic human ideal and thus purports to make normative claims pertaining to actual human individuals. So far, we have only developed the outlines of this Hegelian conception of beauty. We now have to make it more concrete by looking at actual artistic representations of human individuals who embody the aesthetic human ideal. The discussion of concrete instances of beautiful human individuals represented in works of art will also bring into sharper relief the fundamental flaw inherent in the aesthetic human ideal from Hegel's point of view: roughly speaking, individuals who embody this ideal lack a dimension of subjectivity.

By looking at concrete artistic representations of beautiful individuals, we will also bring into view a dimension of the present conception of beauty that has remained somewhat in the background in the preceding chapters, but which was one of the main themes of the introduction: the aesthetic human ideal originates for Hegel in the ancient Greek culture; accordingly, its original and most compelling articulations can be found in ancient Greek works of art.

I open the chapter with some general reflections on how Hegel's conception of the human aesthetic ideal relates to our own common sense understanding of human beauty. I try to show that not only are the two not as far apart as it may seem at first sight; moreover, the human aesthetic ideal suggests an attractive expansion of our common sense understanding, which makes it possible to think of human character—rather than only a human being's external appearance—as a potential object of aesthetic praise.

### HUMAN BEAUTY AND THE BEAUTIFUL CHARACTER

According to the Hegelian conception of beauty developed in the preceding chapters, the paradigmatic beautiful object is the human individual. One

could also put this by saying that beauty on this conception is primarily human beauty. This is not because human beings have particularly striking or elegant natural features that set them apart from other living creatures, but rather because they are capable of achieving a unique unity of inner spirit and outer body, spirit and nature in Hegel's view. One question one might raise at this point is to what extent Hegel's theory of beauty, since it places the human being at center stage, is in accord with our common-sense conception of human beauty. One might think that according to our ordinary understanding, in contrast to Hegel's view, a human individual's beauty is a purely natural property, or a combination of such properties, rather than a matter of the *unity* of spirit and nature. Human beings are considered beautiful, for instance, when they have thick, shiny hair; symmetrical facial features; even, clear skin; and white, regular teeth. It is such natural features that we find attractive and beautiful in humans. However, from a Hegelian point of view, one might reply that in fact, when we find human individuals aesthetically praiseworthy, this is never just a question of appreciating their natural features, but rather of seeing their natural features as expressions or manifestations of some inner quality, a certain attitude or *ethos* perhaps. This fact is exploited, for instance, by advertisements and commercials, which present beautiful people as embodiments of a certain lifestyle or attitude that, in turn, is associated with a particular product. A beautiful young woman in a TV commercial, for instance, is usually supposed to embody attitudes or spiritual qualities such as energy, optimism, independence or ambition. Her body and facial features are beautiful only insofar as they are particularly apt to express this attitude or style of life, insofar as we can see them as a manifestation of it. Of course, we do not believe that her symmetrical facial features, shiny hair or white teeth are a manifestation of her spirit in the sense that they are intentionally made or produced. In fact, here our intuition appears to be that such features lose their aesthetic quality and appeal if they turn out to be the product of intentional creation rather than given by nature. However, with Hegel one might point out that we rarely find human individuals beautiful when they are presented to us in a merely static way, as lifeless images. Rather, we need to see them engage in physical movement and action in order to appreciate their beauty. It is not just the woman's shiny hair or white teeth that are beautiful, for instance, but the way in which these assets feature in her gestures and movements. But in such gestures and movements, we see an interaction between inner spirit and external, natural features.

Another, related issue is the connection between beauty and youth. In general, we tend to find young people more beautiful than old ones; old age appears to be an impediment to beauty. One might think that this cannot be accounted for within Hegel's conception of human beauty, for an individual's age has nothing to do with a unity of soul and body; it is rather simply a natural fact about the individual. However, Hegel's theory can explain that youth—in general, though this does not hold without exception—is at least a

necessary condition for beauty. Beauty is present where spirit manifests itself in human nature according to the present conception. But as we have seen in the preceding two chapters, such manifestation is impeded in Hegel's view where a human being's nature or external appearance is subject to purely natural forces to the extent that they impede the free manifestation of spirit. Pox, scars, and paralyzed limbs, for instance, are the result of natural processes, rather than of the intentional, formative power of spirit. But the same is true of those physical processes that get hold of the human body when it ages: the sagging of the skin, the weakening of the limbs, the bent posture. When the body ages, it slowly begins to escape the forming influence of spirit, and thereby becomes unfit to exhibit any longer the unity of inner and outer that is constitutive of beauty according to the present conception.

But this emphasis on the unity of inner and outer might make one wonder whether the present conception of beauty does not on the other hand include too many instances within the category of the beautiful and thereby contradict our commonsense. Might not, for instance, an individual's weary mind be perfectly expressed in his worn out, limp body? And would we not have to consider this as an instance of beauty according to the present conception? However, we have to keep in mind here exactly what kind of unity between inner and outer Hegel takes to be constitutive of beauty. The condition of weariness would not, strictly speaking, qualify as an expression of *inner* spirit from Hegel's point of view. Weariness is a mood, a passive, affective state. In contrast, the inner spirit, as Hegel understands it, is something free and active that initially stands in opposition to the external, natural body: for instance, the deliberate and intentional pursuit of free purposes, such as writing or philosophical thinking, that, once it has become skillful, becomes unified with the body's movements. It is precisely this unity of active and passive, of deliberate and automatic, of spirit and nature, which ultimately underlies the phenomenon of beauty on the present account. But where a weary body expresses a weary mind, we have no such unity of opposites, but rather a mere correspondence between two natural conditions, a subjective and affective one, and a bodily, externally visible one. In this case, body and mind have simply begun simultaneously to fade.

In chapter 1, we saw that the notion of habit is central to Hegel's understanding of the unity of inner and outer or spirit and nature that is constitutive of beauty. So far, we have been discussing the unity of inner and outer primarily in terms of a unity of spirit and human natural *body*. However, the notion of a unity of spirit and nature has potentially a more general sense. It is not only the body, but human first nature more generally, with all its naturally given sensations, passions, desires and inclinations, which can be integrated into a unity of spirit and nature through the acquisition of habit. For instance, when a human individual's ethical convictions are being integrated with her natural desires and inclinations through habituation, we can speak of a unity of a spiritual element—in this case, manifest in an ethical conviction—and a natural element—in this case, the individual's



natural predispositions such as desires and inclinations. That Hegel wishes to understand the unity of spirit and nature that is constitutive of beauty on the present account in this broad sense—rather than, more narrowly, only in the sense of a unity of spirit and natural *body*—becomes obvious from his discussion of how the aesthetic human ideal is articulated in ancient Greek art, as I shall try to show below.

In any case, the Hegelian notion that the unity of human spirit and nature broadly conceived is constitutive of aesthetic excellence dovetails nicely with a certain way we think and speak about an individual's character and the way character manifests itself in action. In general, an individual's character is revealed in the choices she makes, in what she wills. But one's choice does not always manifest itself in what one does—one may occasionally suffer from weakness of will, for instance, and be driven to act contrary to one's deliberate choice by recalcitrant desires or inclinations. In contrast, drawing on Hegel's conception of habit as second nature, we can say that where one's choice of will has become habitual, it is immediately reflected in one's actions. For where one's choice of will has become one's second nature, one's inclinations and passions have been formed in such a way that they remain in accord with this choice and can no longer lead one's actions astray. If we perceive this kind of close connection between deliberate choice and action in an individual, we tend to ascribe such qualities as consistency, strength of will, or determination to them. Furthermore, in such a case we may say of them that they 'have character'. By this we do not just mean that there is some way their character is like, for this is true of every human individual. Rather, it is meant as a kind of praise: to have character means to have a will that is not led astray by recalcitrant desires and inclinations, and which therefore manifests itself in one's actions. Or rather, to put it the other way around, to have character means to have desires and inclinations in tune with one's will. But while to say of someone that they have character is to praise them, this is no moral praise, for someone can have character and yet be a morally bad person: someone can pursue a purpose that we find morally despicable with determination, strength of will and consistency.<sup>1</sup>

In light of the present conception of beauty, we can explain this non-moral praise of character as a kind of aesthetic praise: to say of someone that they have character is to say of them that they have—or rather, that they are—a *beautiful* character. A beautiful character is an individual whose will manifests itself in her actions, mediated through habit, or for whom it has become second nature to act in accord with her deliberate choice. Such a beautiful character will experience the kind of 'unity with oneself' that is characteristic of beauty from Hegel's point of view. That is to say, she will not suffer from inner division, but will find her passions and inclinations, in short, her nature, to be in accord with her will or purpose, which she always finds readily expressed in her actions. She will be at one with her actions, one might say. Thus this is a point at which Hegel's theory of beauty can potentially *expand* our commonsense understanding of beauty, in particular

of human beauty. Once we accept the idea that beauty consists in a unity of inner and outer or spirit and nature, we can follow Hegel in allowing that this manifestation can be understood as a relation between individual spirit or will and body as well as between individual spirit or will and human nature more generally. This, in turn, leads us to the view that not just human bodies, but human characters can be beautiful: a beautiful character is an individual whose will is unified with her passions and inclinations, and whose actions flow seamlessly from this unity, such that she is at one with her actions.

Philosophers have often noted that the way we think about character and its relation to the will has a somewhat paradoxical air. On the one hand, actions that are expressions of our character are supposed to be expressions of our conscious choice, will, practical reasoning and judgment—they are actions we have to take responsibility for. As Bernard Williams puts it: '[T]o be an expression of character is perhaps the most substantial way in which an action can be one's own'.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, our character traits are not under our immediate voluntary control. We cannot change them at will, and sometimes actions that are in accord with our character force themselves upon us with necessity. A deeply honest person, for instance, when asked why she told the truth in a particular situation, will typically explain her action simply by saying something like 'I just had to'. Thus our character appears to be both something like a quasi-natural force to which we are subject, and something we actively and deliberately participate in. From Hegel's point of view, this paradox connects with the ambiguity of habit we discussed in chapter 1: through habituation, a free, deliberate act is being integrated with, and may even be transformed into, a kind of quasi-natural necessity. In fact, with Hegel we can think of character traits as habits. They are traits we acquire intentionally and with the participation of our will, but once acquired, they become second nature for us. In our character traits, our will expresses itself, but in a quasi-natural form, such that we may sometimes experience the actions flowing from our character traits as having a certain necessity to them. But while we all have characters, a beautiful character is one in whom the integration of will and natural dispositions, passions and inclinations is complete, where there is no longer any gap between what someone wills and what he is and does.

We have seen throughout that Hegel's stance on the unity of spirit and nature that is realized in the aesthetic human ideal is ambiguous. On the one hand, as we saw in chapter 3, Hegel can acknowledge that this unity is of value both for the individual who embodies it and for those who perceive such an individual: for the former, this unity affords an experience of inner unity and of feeling at home in one's natural body; for the latter, this unity affords the experience of an immediately perceptible presence of spirit in nature. On the other hand, Hegel indicates repeatedly that the process of habituation, through which the beautiful unity of spirit and nature is accomplished, may fail to accomplish its *telos* of affording

liberation, and instead return to a state of quasi-natural immediacy, a kind of self-enslavement of spirit. Furthermore, Hegel also suggests that where the human individual embodies a perfect unity of spirit and nature, she is lacking a dimension of subjectivity that manifests itself in the capacity to distance oneself and withdraw from one's natural or quasi-natural determinations. Analogously, Hegel's assessment of the beautiful character is again ambivalent. On the one hand, he acknowledges that in the beautiful character we see a unity of will and human nature, an absence of inner division, which we find admirable and praiseworthy. On the other hand, he raises the question of what value we are ultimately to ascribe to this kind of unity. We will see that Hegel presents a criticism of the beautiful character according to which this character exemplifies precisely the kind of tension that we identified in the preceding chapter as being inherent in the aesthetic human ideal in general.

However, there is a complexity to Hegel's stance on the beautiful character that we have to take into consideration. We already observed that someone can have character and yet be an ethically bad person. From Hegel's point of view, we can therefore say that someone can be a beautiful character and yet be an ethically bad person. Ethical and aesthetic praise of character can come apart. The obvious example of such a divergence of ethical and aesthetic excellence is that of a person who is wholeheartedly and with undivided determination devoted to the pursuit of a purpose that is ethically wrong. Shakespeare's Macbeth, or even more Lady Macbeth, are striking examples of such characters. We will discuss this type of character below. It is important to note, though, that from Hegel's point of view there is yet a different, more complex way in which the ethical and aesthetic excellence of a character can come apart. As we will see, according to Hegel, even a beautiful character who is devoted to the pursuit of an ethically worthy purpose, or following an ethically worthy principle, is ultimately not beyond doubt in ethical respect. For where acting in accord with certain ethical principles has become an individual's second nature, this is *not* a guarantee for the individual to end up performing only actions that are ethically right. On the contrary, in Hegel's view, this is almost a guarantee for the individual to do wrong. Thus Hegel's main ethical criticism of the beautiful character is not that a beautiful character may pursue unethical purposes, but rather that even if a character is pursuing ethically worthy purposes, if she is a beautiful character, she is bound to arrive at wrong ethical judgments and to do wrong.

## BEAUTIFUL CHARACTERS IN ART: HEROES AND VILLAINS

### The Moral Psychology of the Hero

In the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel introduces the beautiful character who pursues an ethically worthy purpose under the title of the hero: beautiful

characters who also pursue an ethically worthy purpose are heroes. Hegel finds the most striking examples of heroes in Greek myth and art, and in particular in the protagonists of Greek tragedy. In fact, as we will see, Greek tragedy is for Hegel essentially the tragedy of the heroic character. The hero is not only an ethically problematic figure, but he is a person who almost inevitably gets involved in tragic conflicts.

For Hegel, it is essential to the hero that he has a twofold nature; this twofold nature is also what ultimately underlies his problematic aspects. On the one hand, the hero fully identifies with certain principles, and he has made these principles his own in the sense that it has become his second nature to act in accord with them. These principles determine his character as a whole. But on the other hand, these principles are ethical principles, and this means that they are associated with the *ethos*, the ethical life of a community. It is only in the context of a community that these principles are valid and acknowledged as ethical principles.<sup>3</sup> Because he has made them his own and identifies with these principles, the hero is fully at one with himself as he acts in accord with them; to act in accord with them is an expression of *his* will. But at the same time, as he acts in accord with these principles, the hero also represents the ethical will of a community, or at least purports to do so. Thus the hero's actions are supposed to be both expressions of his own will and of the will of a community. This aspect of the hero's nature may also be expressed by saying that an ethical principle of his community comes alive in his individuality and action. The hero embodies this principle. Hegel introduces the term *pathos* in order to describe this relation of embodiment between the hero and an ethical principle of his community: the ethical principle becomes the hero's *pathos*, where a *pathos* is a 'power which moves the human soul (*Gemüt*)'.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, on Hegel's account, this embodiment of an ethical principle by the hero has three implications, the first concerning the hero's perspective of practical deliberation, the second concerning the relation between will and action in the hero, and the third concerning the phenomenology of acting in accord with an ethical principle from the point of view of the hero.

To begin with, the hero considers it as a *necessity* to act in accord with the ethical principle he endorses, while this necessity is not a natural necessity, but a necessity rooted in his character. Thus it is not physically impossible for the hero to act in a way that contravenes the ethical principle he endorses. Rather, whatever the alternatives are and in whatever circumstances he finds himself, the hero just cannot endorse a course of action that would violate the principle he follows. The possibility of deliberately deciding to engage in such a course of action lies beyond his deliberative horizon, one might say. In this sense, the hero does not choose what he does: he does not choose between either acting in accord with the principle he endorses or not. Rather, he is immediately committed to acting in accord with it. Hegel describes this

immediate devotion of the hero to a particular ethical principle in the following way:

[T]he individual is what it is, it acts because of its character, because of this pathos, and it is a character because it is just that. This is the strength of the old characters, that they do not choose, but are what they do. It is weakness if my subjectivity is separate from my will. The highest weakness is indecision. The decision must not be *Willkür*, the connection between will and subjectivity must not be dissolvable. The figures are this and always this, and in this lies their greatness. Our notion of guilt becomes obsolete here. The great character cannot but act in the way he does; he is not innocent, but what he is and wants is his deed, his willing.<sup>5</sup>

The hero does not choose, but he *is what he does*: given his character, he has to act in a certain way; he would have to become someone else, assume a different identity, in order to act otherwise. His character forces a certain course of action upon him with necessity. At the same time, in being an expression of his character, the hero's action is an expression of his will, a manifestation of his decision. His will manifests itself in the form of necessity: his decision is not *Willkür*, as Hegel puts it. Here we can see clearly the paradox mentioned above, which is inherent in the notion of character, and in particular in the beautiful character: a human will assumes the form of quasi-natural necessity.

The fact that the hero's perspective of practical deliberation is limited in the sense that it necessarily excludes certain practical options—in particular, the option of acting contrary to the ethical principle the hero endorses—is particularly relevant in situations of conflict, where it may appear as if the hero should have all kinds of reasons to breach the ethical principle he endorses, and act contrary to it. For instance, prudential reasons—where the hero's life or limb is in danger; one might think that this might constitute a reason for him to consider violating his ethical principle. But even in such cases, the hero will stand firm and follow his principle; to do otherwise is just not a viable practical option for him, no matter what the alternatives.

The second essential feature of the embodiment of an ethical principle by the hero, also referred to in the passage quoted above, lies in the way the hero's will relates to his actions. In the hero, there is no divergence, no gap between decision, will and action. The hero's entire nature—his sentiments, passions and dispositions—have been formed such as to be in accord with the ethical norm he endorses. There are therefore no deviant passions or desires in him. Whatever the hero decides to do immediately translates into an action of his.

Finally, heroic action has a distinctive phenomenology in Hegel's view. As we saw in chapter 3, in addition to its sensuously perceptible aspect, beauty also has an essential phenomenological side for Hegel. The beautiful

figure is a human subject who essentially experiences her body and her own relation to it in a certain way: she feels unified or reconciled with this body, acknowledges no distinction between the body and herself. This reconciliation gives rise to a unique cheerfulness on the side of the beautiful subject, which in turn is constitutive of one dimension of the value of beauty. An equivalent to this cheerful feeling of reconciliation can also be found in the hero. Acting in accord with a particular ethical norm has become the hero's second nature. He does not need to deliberate and reflect on whether to act in this way or not. Furthermore, in order to put his practical decision into action, he does not have to overcome or fight against recalcitrant desires and inclinations, but performs the action he considers as ethically demanded with ease and pleasure. The hero therefore embodies the opposite of a type of moral agent whose conception Hegel seems to associate with Kant: a person whose ethical excellence consists in his ability to defeat his inclinations and desires and subject them to what he considers to be his duty. According to this conception, Hegel writes, 'what is moral exists only where a victory is achieved' and 'morality consists essentially in struggle and contradiction against the natural will'.<sup>6</sup> The hero does not suffer from such inner division, and he does not have to fight against and subjugate his inclinations; rather, he can rely on and follow them, for his 'natural will' has itself been transformed into an ethical will and steers him with ease and quasi-natural necessity in the right direction.

It would not be wrong to say that the hero is the central figure of ancient Greek art from Hegel's point of view, and that the hero embodies above all the Greek conception of beauty, or more specifically of the beautiful human individual. However, in order to make this statement fully plausible, it will be necessary to point out how the hero stands according to Hegel in relation to another figure that is also prominent in ancient Greek art: the Greek god. A divine figure as represented in Greek art is an anthropomorphous creature that embodies a certain *pathos* according to Hegel, just like the figure of a hero. As we have seen, a *pathos* consists in an ethical principle, value or norm, which is central to the ancient Greek culture, and which is embodied by a human (or at least anthropomorphous) individual. As examples of such *pathe*, Hegel gives the following list: 'family, piety, government, power, honor, friendship, erotic love, love of one's fatherland, property, wealth'.<sup>7</sup> Each *pathos* can obviously be associated with one of the Greek divinities: Aphrodite embodies erotic love, Zeus embodies government, Hera the family, and so forth. Now in Greek art, the gods are mostly represented in the medium of sculpture, and this means that they are shown in a tranquil state, at rest, not involved in action, self-sufficient.<sup>8</sup> If a Greek god is said to embody a certain ethical *pathos*, then, this cannot have the same meaning as the embodiment of a *pathos* by a hero, as elaborated above. The hero embodies a *pathos* or ethical principle in the sense that it has become his second nature to act in accord with this principle; thus this form of embodiment essentially involves action, moreover repeated action, flowing from a

fixed, permanent character state. The Greek gods, in contrast, embody a *pathos* or ethical norm by exhibiting physical, bodily traits that can be seen as expressions of an affinity with the ethical norm in question. In fact, in Hegel's view, the mastery of the ancient sculptors shows itself in how they manage to endow the static bodies of the divine images they create, down to the smallest detail, with the quality of being a manifestation of a certain *pathos*, such that the whole figure is a perfect sign of a particular ethically or politically relevant character trait. Hegel describes, for instance, how the copies we have of the works by the Greek sculptor Phidias show that he was capable of expressing the political power and strength of Zeus even in the muscles of Zeus' body.<sup>9</sup> But ultimately, Hegel does not take this sculptural manifestation of an ethical norm in a divine, anthropomorphous figure to be an adequate instance of beauty. He nowhere provides an explicit, obvious explanation for this,<sup>10</sup> but in light of our discussion above, the answer seems clear enough. An individual's endorsement of an ethical principle or norm cannot manifest itself in a particular, single body or body part, but only in a body engaging in action—more specifically, in repeated action. An ethical principle can become an individual's second nature if it becomes a habit for the individual to act in accord with this principle; but in order to be perceived as a bearer of habits, the individual has to be perceived as engaged in action. Only if an individual repeatedly performs the same actions can we tell that the norm governing these actions has been embraced by the individual or come to be rooted in his nature or character.

### The Beauty of Antigone

In order to illustrate the essential characteristics of the hero, it will be helpful to turn to an example: Hegel's favorite tragic heroine, the principle heroine of Sophocles' *Antigone*. To be sure, it will be difficult to say anything new about Hegel's reading of *Antigone*, since essential aspects of this reading have been covered by the many excellent studies already published on the topic.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, we will come back to the figure of Antigone in the next chapter. Nevertheless, it may be illuminating to point out how Antigone paradigmatically fulfills the essential characteristics of a heroic, beautiful character we have reconstructed above. Since Antigone is a complex figure, and there is more to be said about her from Hegel's point of view than just that she is a perfect example of a heroine, it is not entirely true of her that she does not suffer from inner division and conflict, as we will see in the next chapter. However, for the moment I will just focus on why Antigone qualifies as a beautiful, heroic character from Hegel's point of view.

The background of Antigone's fate as it is presented by Sophocles is well known. *Antigone* continues the story of the children of Oedipus, Antigone and Ismene, and their brothers Eteocles and Polynices. Eteocles and Polynices have just killed each other in the battle for Thebes, and Creon (their uncle) has assumed the rule over Thebes in their stead. The first political



decree he issues is that of the two sons of Oedipus, only Eteocles, who was fighting to defend Thebes, shall be properly buried; Polynices, on the other hand, is to be considered a traitor and left unburied, as prey for the birds and dogs. The play opens with Antigone meeting her sister Ismene in order to break the news about the decree to her. This encounter is significant, because it shows a great deal about Antigone's own character in contrast to Ismene's. Antigone declares that she is determined to bury their brother in spite of Creon's decree, and in spite of the fact that she faces a death penalty for violating it. Ismene, in contrast, repeatedly urges Antigone to think, to be sensible and prudent, and also reminds her that she is defying a powerful opponent: the city, represented by Creon. Ismene engages in practical deliberation, weighs options and reasons, but Antigone has already settled on a conviction of what ought to be done: her brother needs to be buried under all circumstances. No reason could be strong enough to persuade Antigone to abstain from this act. Antigone does not need to deliberate, she has already decided what to do.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, even though Ismene refuses to cooperate with Antigone and help her bury her brother, nothing can keep Antigone from going ahead and performing the deed herself. It is interesting to note here that since Antigone is apparently physically incapable of properly burying her brother by herself, what she ends up doing is to simply sprinkle some dust on her brother's body—which, however, is recognized by the guards and by Creon as an attempt at a proper burial.<sup>13</sup> This shows Antigone's unwavering determination: once she has made her decision, she immediately translates it into action, no matter what obstacles she faces. She realizes her purpose, once settled on, even where the limitation of her means might make it seem sensible for her to reconsider and adjust the purpose.

In his discussion of the figure of Antigone in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel also gives a concrete meaning to the idea that what is distinctive of the hero is that ethical principles become his second nature. Polynices is Antigone's brother, hence the bond between them is a natural one. Antigone emphasizes repeatedly that she wants to bury her brother out of love for him—hence her motivation for performing her deed appears to be a natural emotion.<sup>14</sup> However, Hegel argues that in Antigone's relation to her brother, what was originally a natural emotion has been transformed into a distinctively ethical motivation. In the Greek community, what a woman hopes to receive from her brother is not just love, but a type of distinctively ethical recognition. A husband's recognition of his wife is always mixed with erotic desire and hence with a natural element. In contrast, a brother, as a free participant of the Greek political community, can give his sister the kind of ethical recognition she needs in order to know herself recognized as a member of the ethical community.<sup>15</sup> It is precisely this type of ethical recognition that Antigone would have received from her now-dead brother. Furthermore, if Antigone was driven simply by natural love for her brother, it would be odd that she is so passionate about proving her love for him by performing his burial rites. That his burial rites be performed is important



for Polynices not as a person whom Antigone loves and whose wishes she wants to fulfill, but rather as a member of the community. Hegel argues that it is essential for the ethical integrity and identity of the community that its dead members are being buried. Death befalls the members of the community as a natural necessity, a natural power in whose grip they are themselves turned into natural entities. Only by performing the burial rites for them can the community retrieve them as members of the ethical sphere, and give their death an ethical meaning. This is why the performance of the burial rites for dead family members is an important duty in the community.<sup>16</sup> Thus when Antigone relentlessly insists on performing the burial rites for her brother, her natural love for him has been infused with an ethical quality, or she has come to interpret her original natural bond to her brother in an ethical way. Accordingly, it has become ethically inconceivable for her not to bury him.

While Antigone on the one hand identifies with the principle that dead brothers have to be buried to the extent that not burying her brother has become inconceivable for her, she knows, on the other hand, that this principle expresses not only her own, particular will, but the ethical will of the community of which she considers herself to be a member. Thus, Antigone knowingly acts in the context of a political community and expects her deed to find the approval of the community. This becomes particularly obvious in her final encounter with Creon, in the course of which she appeals to the entire assembled community—represented by the chorus—to testify that her deed was justified.<sup>17</sup> Antigone here openly declares that she expects to be given glory as a reward for her deed, and that the citizens would praise her if they were not afraid of speaking openly before Creon. The citizens' lips are 'locked in fear', Antigone claims, but if they could speak openly they would not hesitate to agree that Polynices' burial is ethically required and justified.<sup>18</sup>

### The Divergence of Ethical and Aesthetic Excellence

The political community whose ethical will the tragic heroes take themselves to represent is certainly not identical, in Hegel's view, to the actual Greek *polis* in which the Greek tragedies would have been performed. Most importantly, the political communities represented in Greek tragedies are typically not democracies, but ruled by kings. However, in Hegel's view the communities represented in the tragedies share essential things in common with the actual Greek city state, the *polis*. Above all, what they have in common is that the *ethos* in both communities consists in a multiplicity of values or principles that have to be adjudicated and reconciled. More specifically, this multiplicity of values can be narrowed down to two fundamental ethical values that constitute the pillars of the *ethos* of the community: on the one hand, the value of the family, on the other hand, the value of the political community as a whole.

Hegel's most detailed analysis of the structure of the actual Greek *polis* can be found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. For Hegel, the Greeks are the first people in world history to have come to appreciate the value of human individual freedom, understood as an individual's ability to pursue one's own private and personal ends, in short, to govern one's own life. The highest ethical value for the Greeks is individual freedom. But this notion of individual freedom as self-government is interpreted in a political sense by the Greeks: individuals are free in the democratically governed political community, the *polis*, in which all citizens can participate in the processes of lawgiving and administration, and negotiate political decisions in the assemblies. In the democratic institutions of the *polis*, each citizen is asked to voice his opinion and his view in the assembly, and to defend his own, private and particular interests and expect them to be taken into account when political decisions are being made. Thus in the Greeks' view, individual freedom is possible only in the context of the *polis*, in which the citizens can pursue, defend and negotiate their individual interests through democratic self-governance. The Greeks understand individual freedom as being essentially politically realized, or in short: they understand individual freedom in terms of political self-governance.

An important implication of this link between individual freedom and political self-governance is that while the *raison d'être* of the *polis* is the realization of individual freedom, the *polis* requires at the same time, in order to persist and flourish, a certain loyalty with the political community as a whole and its institutions on the side of the citizens. Thus on the one hand, the *polis* is a community of individuals who have particular aims and desires, wishes and ends, which they are free to pursue. On the other hand, the *polis* provides democratic political institutions in which the citizens can express and defend their particular ends, solve conflicts between their own ends and those of other citizens, and eventually agree together on which political decisions to make and which laws to implement.

Thus there are two kinds of ethical claims that can legitimately be made within such a community: claims pertaining to the family, and claims pertaining to the political community. Hegel calls these two kinds of normative claims the 'divine law'<sup>19</sup> and 'the human law'<sup>20</sup> respectively. By the human law, he is referring to any demands and normative claims that may arise from the fact that the community has to persist and maintain its constitution as a unified community, as well as its political institutions. Through these institutions, the citizens pass 'human laws', and make political decisions, resulting from the negotiation of their particular ends; they govern themselves, in short, and therein exercise their freedom. As citizens of a freedom-securing political community, furthermore, all individual citizens have one end in common, the persistence and flourishing of the community that enables them to be free. Insofar as they value their own freedom, they value the persistence and flourishing of the community that makes their freedom possible. Thus with regard to this end, all citizens are equal,

independently of which particular, private ends they may have. They all share their loyalty towards the political community as a whole.<sup>21</sup>

But as a community of free citizens, the community consists necessarily of individual members. One way in which the individual members differ from each other is that they are born into different families, to different parents. This difference is a natural, immediate one, creating natural bonds of loyalty and emotion between an individual and a particular sub-group of individuals within the political community. Such natural bonds also create certain normative demands—such as the demand that one ought to be loyal to one's family members—which Hegel refers to as the 'divine law'.<sup>22</sup> The term 'divine' means here simply that the law deriving from this sphere is not self-consciously man-made, but based on natural, immediate attachments between people.<sup>23</sup> Because it recognizes these two types of ethical laws or normative claims as legitimate, the primary ethical task for the Greek *polis* is to achieve a reconciliation between them.<sup>24</sup>

What is important for our present argument is that where the *ethos* of a community consists in a multiplicity—or, as in the present case, in a duality—of values, it is possible for conflicts of value to occur. For instance, as in the case of Antigone and Creon, an act on behalf of one's family may stand in conflict with the aims of the community, and vice versa. Or the citizens of the community may be requested to risk their lives in order to defend their city. Thus it may sometimes be ethically legitimate, or even ethically required within the community, that one of the two ethical principles be breached. Neither of the two ethical principles is valid absolutely and unconditionally; rather, they limit each other. Within such a context of multiple, mutually delimiting values, the primary ethical competence an individual has to possess is to understand that particular ethical principles are valid only conditionally, and to adjudicate potential conflicts of value. Ethical excellence consists at least partly in the ability to negate, under certain circumstances, an ethical claim that would otherwise be valid.

But this is precisely the ethical competence that the hero is lacking. When a hero identifies with an ethical principle, the principle has become his second nature. This means that it is inconceivable for the hero that acting in a way that violates the ethical principle he endorses could ever be ethically legitimate. He cannot, under any circumstances, negate the principle or distance himself from it—in order to do so, he would have to become a different person. This, then, constitutes the back side of the strength of will and determination of the hero: his practical perspective is limited, he cannot abstract from his ethical principle, for the boundary of this principle is the boundary of his identity. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel describes this heroic type of moral psychology by stating that '[t]he ethical consciousness [. . .] is essentially character'.<sup>25</sup> Where ethical principles constitute the substance of a character, this creates the kind of ethical incapacity, or ethical necessity, which is typical of the hero.

It is important in this context that, according to Hegel's analysis, the hero is typically devoted to only one of the two fundamental ethical principles of his community in an exclusive way—either he represents the family, or the political community, but not both. In Creon and Antigone, we see this feature embodied in a paradigmatic way: Creon stands in for the community, Antigone for the family. This division means that when the hero, on acting in accord with his ethical principles, encounters the opposition of another individual who embodies the other principle, he cannot appreciate this as an ethically legitimate form of resistance. Rather, he perceives it as a resistance that can claim no ethical legitimacy for itself, which is simply wrong:

The ethical consciousness, because it is decisively for one of the two powers [i.e. the two ethical principles], is essentially character; it does not accept that both have the same essential nature. For this reason, the opposition between them appears as an unfortunate collision of duty merely with a reality which possesses no rights of its own.<sup>26</sup>

Here, the hero's unconditional devotion to only one particular ethical principle turns into a necessary intolerance with regard to the other ethical principle and its defendants.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, the hero is liable to do wrong in such a situation, by disregarding the legitimate ethical claim of his opponent and acting in a way that violates it.

But it should be noted that even if the hero was devoted to both ethical principles at the same time and to the same degree, this would not really solve the problem. For this would simply mean that in a situation in which the two principles conflict, he would be faced with an irresolvable *inner* conflict: both principles would be unconditionally valid for him, hence the breach of either one would constitute an impermissible ethical offense. The problem, then, is not so much that the hero is devoted to only one particular ethical principle, but that he is unconditionally devoted to it, that he has made it his second nature. Even if he were unconditionally devoted to two ethical principles, this would not give him the crucial ethical competence to reconcile them in a case of conflict.

Nevertheless, the *particularity* of the hero's character, or of character in general, does play an important role for Hegel. It is characteristic of the hero that an ethical principle has become his second nature. But as we have seen in chapter 1, human second nature is for Hegel grounded in and a transformation of human first nature. First nature, however, is always particular. According to Hegel's analysis, this particularity of human first nature is captured in Greek thought by the notion that human nature is divided between the sexes. Thus, there are two different kinds of human nature for the Greeks, which manifest themselves in two different sexes: male and female. Which sex a person has is a natural fact about him or her. But it is also an ethically significant fact for the Greeks, for by virtue of his or her sex, a person is associated with one of the two ethical principles

that constitute the *ethos* of the community as a whole.<sup>28</sup> Male individuals, it is held, are by nature active, assertive, powerful, aggressive, rational, and tend to think in universal terms. Female individuals, in contrast, are naturally relenting, passive, emotional, and tend to focus on particulars. Most importantly, women are strongly attached to the family and its individual members; men, in contrast, tend to break free from the narrow confines of the family, and rather to relate themselves to the community as a whole. Accordingly, male individuals are predisposed to be active in the political sphere, whereas female individuals are more apt to remain in the sphere of the family.<sup>29</sup> Even if one rejects the view that dispositions of potential ethical significance are associated with biological sex, however, it must be conceded that human natural dispositions or traits are always particular ones. Human beings are by nature aggressive, relenting, fearless, sensitive, kind, cruel, passionate and so on. If such natural traits or dispositions are turned into character traits or second nature, then the ethical principles embodied by such traits can likewise be only particular principles. For instance, an individual's natural kindness may be developed into the ethically praiseworthy attitude of respecting other people and their concerns. But it is hard to imagine how natural kindness could be developed into a patriotic attitude, or into courage. Accordingly, a hero or beautiful character whose devotion to a certain ethical principle has become his second nature—and is therefore rooted in his first nature—is bound to be devoted to a particular ethical principle. Of course, it is conceivable that he may be devoted to several ethical principles, just as it is conceivable that an individual may by nature be equipped with several, perhaps opposite traits or dispositions. But again, this would mean that in cases of conflict between the two particular ethical principles, the individual would be faced with an irresolvable tension. He would be unconditionally devoted to both of them, and could not conceive of breaching either one of them. Hence where ethical principles become the substance of an individual's character—his second nature—these principles are always particular ones. Ethical character, like the human first nature from which it springs, is always particular. Furthermore, where ethical principles become the substance of an individual's character, the individual loses the capacity to distance himself from and negate them.

Hence there is a price to be paid for the beautiful unification of an ethical principle with an individual character; the price is what one might call ethical inflexibility. This inflexibility constitutes the ethical counterpart to the self-enslavement of spirit or relapse into quasi-natural immediacy that may sometimes result from habituation, as discussed in chapter 1. Where an ethical principle has become the hero's second nature, he cannot distance himself from it or negate it. The hero therefore lacks precisely the kind of ethical competence that is required in an ethical context that consists in a multiplicity of values that have to be adjudicated and possibly reconciled with one another. It follows from this that the hero, contrary to his own

ambition, cannot in fact represent or embody the ethical will of his community where the *ethos* of this community consists in a multiplicity of value. For while the ethical will of the community is to unify or reconcile these values, the ethical will of the hero, in contrast, is to promote them—or typically just one of them—unconditionally. It is precisely the hero's aesthetic excellence, then—his beautiful character—which undermines his potential ethical excellence.

It has now become obvious that Hegel's ethical criticism of the beautiful character runs parallel to his critical diagnosis of the aesthetic human ideal discussed in previous chapters. As we have seen, for Hegel a human individual who embodies the aesthetic human ideal lacks a dimension of subjectivity that human individuals have to develop in order for them to become spiritual beings in the full sense of the term and thus to actualize their *telos*. The heroic beautiful character embodies a unity of human will and human nature, and accordingly a unity of human will and action. The human will here assumes the form of second nature. As a result, the hero's will becomes absorbed in a quasi-natural necessity; acting in accord with a certain norm, rule or principle becomes inevitable for the hero, as he immediately identifies with this way of acting and cannot negate it or oppose himself to it. The hero therefore lacks subjectivity, the capacity to distance himself from his immediate determinations, his second nature. But precisely this capacity constitutes a crucial ethical competence in an environment in which several ethical values have to be adjudicated and reconciled with each other. The hero is therefore liable to a form of ethical criticism from Hegel's point of view, which Hegel sums up in the *Encyclopedia* in the following words: 'But encumbered with immediacy, the freedom of the subject is only custom, without infinite reflection into itself, without the subjective inwardness of *conscience*'.<sup>30</sup>

### Non-Heroic Beautiful Characters

So far, the beautiful characters we discussed were at the same time heroes, that is, characters whose substance consists in an ethically worthy principle. However, Hegel's conception of the beautiful character makes it possible to conceive of beautiful characters who are not heroes, and therefore not dedicated to the pursuit of an ethically worthy purpose. We saw above that where an ethical principle is to be embodied by a character—a hero—the principle itself has to be particular. For human second nature results from a transformation of first nature; human first nature, however, is particular. Nevertheless, the resulting characters who embody a particular ethical principle still have a universal aspect to them in the sense that they represent an ethical principle that is acknowledged as valid not just by themselves, but by an entire ethical community. There is a more radical sense in which characters can be particular: they can embody principles or purposes that are valid or of interest only to themselves, from their own point of

view. We can call this type of particular principles, purposes or interests, which are valid only from the point of view of one individual, 'subjective'. To be sure, every individual has such subjective purposes and interests, and to pursue them does not yet make an individual a beautiful character. In order for an individual to be a beautiful character, a subjective purpose she pursues has to become her second nature and come to be rooted in her passions, dispositions and temperament. She must come to be unified with this purpose such that it comprises her entire identity. Thus a non-heroic beautiful character shares essential characteristics with the hero: she shows determination in her actions and in general a unity of nature, inclination, passion and temperament on the one hand, and particular will and purpose on the other.

However, because the non-heroic beautiful character pursues a subjective purpose rather than an ethical one, this purpose must itself be derived from her particular, subjective nature. A hero chooses her essential, characteristic purpose in accord with the *ethos* of the community. A non-heroic beautiful character, in contrast, must choose her essential purpose on the basis of the subjective passions, dispositions or interests she finds herself with, given her particular nature. For instance, an individual may fall in love with another one, and this love may become a pervasive force that eventually comprises the individual's entire character. Or another individual may be by nature ambitious, and this ambition may be turned into the predominant determination of her character. In non-heroic beautiful characters, then, there is no ethical, universal justification available for why they come to pursue the interests and purposes they pursue. They just end up pursuing them because they happen to have them. Non-heroic beautiful characters are therefore distinguished not by their ethical loyalties, but by the subjective interests and purposes they happen to be given by nature. This is a type of character, Hegel writes,

who does not have a universal interest, but is in accord with his immediate nature, who draws on the latter and keeps to the latter. The particularity of this character is distinct in the way animals are distinguished from one another.<sup>31</sup>

Yet for all this natural immediacy that distinguishes the non-heroic beautiful character from the hero, even the dedication of the non-heroic beautiful character to a particular purpose has to be mediated by his will. The non-heroic beautiful character is not just an individual who is driven by an exceptionally strong natural passion or inclination, say love, hatred or ambition. For character has to do with conscious choice: actions that are expressions of our character are actions we have to take responsibility for. Thus, a beautiful character has to *choose* to pursue a particular purpose, and to show a unity of will and inclination as he pursues it. Hegel points to this aspect of the non-heroic beautiful character by saying that such characters



‘carry themselves out (*sich durchführen; sich vollführen*)’.<sup>32</sup> Such characters carry out, deliberately and with determination, the purpose that constitutes the substance of their identity. Furthermore, where an individual is simply driven immediately by a particular passion or inclination, it is unlikely that such a passion or inclination could ever gain the pervasive force it needs in order to permeate a whole character and constitute its substance. An individual has to embrace a purpose, and to subjugate other, competing interests, passions and inclinations to it, in order for the pursuit of this purpose to become her second nature.

Two examples of such non-heroic, beautiful characters that Hegel seems to find particularly striking are Juliet, of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, and Macbeth, of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. According to Hegel’s interpretation, Juliet’s youth is an important condition of the development of her character. She is initially naïve and inexperienced; her character is mere potentiality, but has not yet taken on any objective, settled shape.<sup>33</sup> When she is struck by love for Romeo, this emotion seizes her soul with unprecedented force. But Juliet does not just *fall* in love; rather, she ‘throws herself at’ this passion, pursues it with cleverness, force and the willingness to sacrifice everything for it. Juliet holds nothing back, but identifies entirely with her love for Romeo.<sup>34</sup> In the figure of Macbeth, the fact that his character is mediated by his will becomes particularly obvious. By the end of the play, Macbeth is a ruthless villain, ready to kill and die in self-defense, but it takes long and painful inner struggles for Macbeth to get to this point. After committing his first murders, he is being tortured by his conscience and a particularly vivid imagination, which conjures up images such as an ocean of blood dyed by his own hands. Hegel puts it this way: ‘Macbeth first wavers, until his passionate ambition has taken hold of him’.<sup>35</sup> Macbeth needs to brace and exhort himself repeatedly—and of course, he has to be pushed on by his wife—until he has finally put himself into the frame of mind that befits his gruesome deeds. At that point, he has finally reached a unity of purpose or will and inner nature. This is clearly expressed in his declaration: ‘From this moment,/The very firstlings of my heart shall be/The firstlings of my hand’.<sup>36</sup> Macbeth—as he has reached his ultimate frame of mind—is Hegel’s primary example of a non-heroic beautiful character who ‘carries himself out’. Hegel writes:

Here we have the tautness (*das Pralle*) of a particular character, rigidity; nothing makes him waver, heavenly and earthly right, all of this has no meaning, all of this he treads down or keeps at a distance, thus he carries himself out.<sup>37</sup>

In light of the figure of Macbeth, we can see particularly well that if we praise a character for his aesthetic qualities, this often implies that the character lacks other qualities such as humaneness, depth, or conscientiousness. Macbeth, before he has achieved inner unity, is certainly not an exemplar



of ethical excellence, nor does he purport to be. But his character, precisely because of its deep inner division, has a certain quality, a depth that we can admire about him. With Hegel, we can say that Macbeth at this point possesses ‘infinite reflection into [him]self’ and ‘the subjective inwardness of *conscience*’.<sup>38</sup> In virtue of this subjective inwardness, we can sympathize with Macbeth. In contrast, once Macbeth has achieved inner unity, his character assumes a brilliance and power that elicits our admiration, but with which we can no longer sympathize. At this point, we can say of Macbeth that his character is beautiful, but this beauty comes at the price of other, more human qualities. Again, this divergence between the aesthetic excellence of a character and the excellence he possesses in virtue of qualities such as depth and conscience parallels the criticism that can be raised with Hegel against the aesthetic human ideal in general. We saw that, for Hegel, a perfectly beautiful human figure lacks subjectivity and depth, and is therefore flawed when considered from the point of view of Hegel’s conception of a human being who has fully developed his spiritual potential. Likewise, where Macbeth becomes a beautiful character, he loses his depth of conscience, and as a consequence deserves greater aesthetic praise, but less human sympathy.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we looked at how the conception of beauty developed in the preceding chapters manifests itself in actual works of art, especially in ancient Greek works of art. According to the interpretation developed in preceding chapters, works of art are beautiful for Hegel in virtue of representing perfectly beautiful human individuals. Such perfectly beautiful individuals are also beautiful characters on Hegel’s account, and they are represented in the artistic medium of drama, in particular ancient Greek drama. I argued that the notion that characters can be potential objects of aesthetic praise, which is implied by the present conception of beauty, constitutes an attractive expansion of our common sense understanding of human beauty.

The present chapter has also revealed more clearly the fundamental flaw inherent in the aesthetic human ideal from Hegel’s point of view. Human individuals who embody the aesthetic human ideal are flawed in the sense that they lack a dimension of subjectivity. In the present chapter we have seen that this flaw can manifest itself in the lack of a particular ethical competence, that is, a lack of the capacity to distance oneself from the ethical principles that have become one’s second nature.

In the next chapter, we will consider two instances in which art, in reaction to the flaw inherent in the aesthetic human ideal, distances itself from it and begins to depict human individuals who are less than fully beautiful.

## NOTES

1. See for instance Kant's remarks on the evil character who is nevertheless an object of admiration: Anth, 293.
2. Williams 1981, 129–30.
3. Aesth. 1823, 304; Aesth. 1826, 44–45.
4. Aesth. 1826, 56; Aesth. 1823, 97. In ancient Greek mythology, the human *pathe* are originally embodied by the Greek gods according to Hegel.
5. Aesth. 1823, 305.
6. Aesth. 1826, 14.
7. Aesth. 1823, 97.
8. Aesth. 1826, 179; Aesth. 1823, 233.
9. Aesth. 1826, 176–77.
10. See *ibid.*, 48–49; Aesth. 1823, 83; VAI, 232 ff./LAI, 176 ff., where Hegel offers considerations that seem to be relevant in this context; see also Houlgate, 2007a, for an illuminating account of Hegel's conception of sculptural beauty and its inherent limitation.
11. For a classical text, see Pöggeler 1964. For more recent comprehensive readings, see for instance Houlgate 2007b, Menke 1996, Schmidt 2001.
12. See Antigone, 60–99. On this aspect of Hegel's Antigone, see also Speight 2001, 50–51 and 57–58.
13. See Antigone, 275–290.
14. Antigone, 85–90.
15. See Phän., § 457.
16. See Phän., § 452, § 453.
17. Antigone, 555–575.
18. Antigone, 565.
19. Phän., § 449.
20. Phän., § 448.
21. On the sphere of human law, see Phän., §§ 447–48, § 455.
22. On the sphere of the divine law, see Phän., §§ 449–51.
23. A remark of Hegel's in the *Philosophy of Right* elucidates why the term 'divine' is appropriate here. Hegel writes that this sphere is associated with the law of the *old* gods, that is, the natural, non-Olympian Greek gods. This law is 'subterranean', no one knows whence it came, and it is contrasted with the obvious, man-made, self-conscious law of the state (PhR, § 166). Hegel adds here that the opposition between the law of the state and the natural, divine law is 'the highest ethical opposition', and therefore the 'highest tragic opposition'.
24. Frederick Neuhouser, in contrast, states that the ancient Greeks, for Hegel, were only acquainted with the kind of freedom that consists in the citizen's unconditional and immediate identification with the political community as a whole. More specifically, Neuhouser interprets Hegel as distinguishing between three different kinds of freedom, personal, moral and social freedom, while ascribing only the latter kind of freedom to the ancient Greeks. Hegel's own philosophical project, according to Neuhouser, is to show how these three forms of freedom can be reconciled in a modern political community (Neuhouser 2008, 205–12). It is not clear, however, how the immediate identification of one's own, individual good with the collective good (the good of the community) can count as a form of freedom—unless the community that one identifies with promotes one's personal (and/or moral) freedom. Hegel insists that one of the most important differences between modernity and antiquity is the modern notion of moral freedom, which is lacking in antiquity. However, Hegel's analysis in the *Phenomenology* suggests that personal freedom does

exist in the Greek *polis* in Hegel's view, or that it is at least recognized as a value in the Greek city states. See in particular Phän., § 455, where Hegel speaks of the importance of engaging the citizens in war in order to promote their loyalty with the community as a whole, and to prevent the community from falling apart into particularized 'systems of personal independence and property'.

25. Phän., § 466.
26. Ibid.
27. In the *Aesthetics*, Hegel also emphasizes the 'one-sidedness' of the heroes, the fact that they are devoted to only one ethical principle: see Aesth. 1823, 301; VAI, 547/LAI, 1215.
28. Phän., § 459.
29. Hegel himself seems to endorse the view that the natural distinction between men and women is of ethical and political significance, in that man and woman are associated with different spheres of the state, namely woman with the family and man with civil society and the state as a whole: see PhR, §§ 165–66; Enz., § 397.
30. Enz., § 557.
31. Aesth. 1826, 145.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid., 147.
34. Ibid., 147; VAI, 205/LAI, 582.
35. Aesth. 1826, 145.
36. Macbeth, 214–15.
37. Aesth. 1826, 145.
38. Enz., § 557.

## 5 Beyond Beauty

### The Pain of Inner Division

The preceding chapters were dedicated to Hegel's account of the classical Greek conception of beauty, which revolves around the aesthetic human ideal. One theme that came up repeatedly in the discussion was the relation between beauty and art. In chapters 2 and 3, I argued that according to the classical conception of beauty as Hegel understands it, the actual human individual serves as a model for the creation of artistic beauty. Art is beautiful by representing perfectly beautiful human figures. At the same time, we also saw, at various points, that the aesthetic human ideal suffers from an inherent flaw on Hegel's account. In light of this flaw, it becomes necessary to question the legitimacy of the aesthetic human ideal as a central paradigm in art. In Hegel's view, the aesthetic human ideal is in fact being put into question in the medium of art itself. In this respect, art proves to be a medium for Hegel that is capable of self-assessment and self-correction—in short, of self-criticism. What is even more remarkable is that this critique of the aesthetic human ideal is first put forward in the very same works of art in which the aesthetic human ideal is presented in its most perfect form: in ancient Greek tragedy. Thus Greek tragedy, on Hegel's interpretation, both presents a perfect vision of beauty and exposes the problematic character of the aesthetic human ideal. In the preceding chapter, we focused on Greek tragedy as a medium for the presentation of the beautiful character and looked at the fundamental flaw that the beautiful character necessarily exhibits on Hegel's account, specifically its lack of subjectivity (which can manifest itself in the form of a lack of a certain capacity for ethical reflection). In the present chapter, we shall see that the deconstruction of beauty in Greek tragedy is not merely a negative affair on Hegel's account. Rather, it leads to the emergence of a new type of personality that is not exhausted by the unity of spirit and nature as embodied by the aesthetic human ideal. In this sense, Greek tragedy offers not merely a critique of the classical conception of beauty, but also points toward a direction in which art may develop once it has abandoned the classical aesthetic paradigm. Whether this means that art ultimately distances itself from beauty altogether (and what implications such a move might have) is a question that we will address in the next chapter. The present chapter shows that in any case, for Hegel, art can and

does begin to distance itself from the aesthetic human ideal once this ideal has been brought into full view in Greek tragedy. In light of the fundamental flaw that is inherent in this ideal on Hegel's account, we can recognize this move as justified or rational.

In the second part of the present chapter, we will consider another development in the history of art that can be interpreted with Hegel as indicating a movement beyond the aesthetic human ideal or the classical conception of beauty. This movement runs parallel to the abandonment of beauty in Greek tragedy: in Christian medieval art—'romantic art', as Hegel calls it—a human ideal is being introduced that no longer consists in a unity of inner and outer, or spirit and nature, but rather in the withdrawal from or striving beyond any form of natural embodiment.

### PAIN, SUBJECTIVITY AND BEAUTY

According to the interpretation we have been pursuing so far, the phenomenon of beauty has its roots in human nature. Human beings are capable of achieving a unique unity of inner and outer, or of spirit and nature in Hegel's view, and beauty is present where this unity has been brought to completion. Beauty can only be brought to completion in art, however, because actual human individuals are not capable of accomplishing a complete unity of spirit and nature. In fact, they *ought* not to achieve such a unity from Hegel's point of view: for precisely by distinguishing themselves from a natural, physical body that they identify with, human individuals gain a crucial dimension of subjectivity. An inner division, a distinction between oneself and one's physical, natural identity, is thus a necessary constituent of subjectivity according to Hegel. However, as we saw in chapter 1, such an inner division is inevitably accompanied by pain, the pain of being separate from something that one identifies with. The notion of pain thus stands directly opposed to the notion of beauty according to the present interpretation. As we have seen in chapter 3, the unity of spirit and nature that is constitutive of beauty for Hegel stands for a certain kind of self-experience that is characterized precisely by the absence of inner division and the pain that comes with such division: the beautiful subject exhibits a unique cheerfulness and serenity, a feeling of being reconciled with oneself. It is this feeling of unity that is directly opposed to the feeling of inner division that is associated with pain.

We have seen that Hegel considers it to be an essential task of art to create beautiful figures, that is, representations of beautiful human individuals: art becomes beautiful by representing individuals who embody the aesthetic human ideal. In fact, in one passage we considered in chapter 3, Hegel even says that art reaches 'maturity' by becoming beautiful art in virtue of representing perfectly beautiful individuals.<sup>1</sup> However, this does not by itself imply that art is necessarily dedicated to the creation of beautiful

human figures in Hegel's view, or that it necessarily aims at being beautiful art in virtue of creating such figures. In the present chapter, we will consider two instances in which art ventures beyond classical beauty or the aesthetic human ideal. More specifically, we will look at two different attempts of art to embrace and bring to expression precisely the subjectivity that is lacking in beauty as embodied by the beautiful human individual.

It will become apparent that both of the two instances in which art moves beyond beauty by expressing subjectivity discussed in the following revolve around pain and its expression—in both cases, subjectivity is expressed as or through pain. There are in fact reasons to hold that for Hegel, the artistic expression of subjectivity is primarily an expression of pain, or that subjectivity in art is primarily expressed as pain. As we discussed in chapter 1, Hegel considers the capacity to endure a specific kind of pain to be one of the quintessential characteristics of spiritual beings. An individual feels such pain, for Hegel, when he is on the one hand embodied in an external form of being, or has an external identity, and on the other hand distances himself from this identity, abstracts from it or opposes himself to it. Both identification with and opposition to an external mode of being are thus essential to the presence of this kind of pain. The individual would not experience his opposition to an external form of being as painful unless he also identified with it. Because he identifies with this form of being, he experiences his opposition to it as an inner division, and hence as painful. On the other hand, there would be no pain to experience unless the individual did not only identify with an external form of being, but also distance himself from or oppose himself to it. Where an individual feels pain, he experiences his unity or identification with an external mode of existence precisely in being divided from it. Thus the experience of pain is an experience of division within unity, or of unity within division. Hegel puts it in the following words: '[S]pirit *can* abstract from everything external and from its own externality, from its very life; it can endure the negation of its individual immediacy, infinite *pain*, i.e. it can maintain itself affirmatively in this negativity and be identical for itself'.<sup>2</sup>

In chapter 1, we saw that for Hegel, the capacity of the human spirit to distance or distinguish itself from a body that it conceives of as its own body—which it identifies with, in other words—is crucial in order for the soul to develop into a real self or I. Spirit manifests itself in an external mode of being, but then proceeds to distinguish itself from this external manifestation. It is thereby reflected into itself, as Hegel puts it, and becomes a genuine subject. Spirit's distinction from its external manifestation is thus an essential aspect of its subjectivity—in order for it to become a real subject, reflected into itself, it has to make this distinction.<sup>3</sup> Because this distinction is painful for the soul, the experience of pain is an essential implication of subjectivity for Hegel.

It follows that where pain—more specifically, pain arising from inner division—is expressed, or subjects who experience such pain are represented,

this is at the same time an expression or representation of subjectivity. Moreover, insofar as pain is experienced by a subject in relation to a sensuous, natural body that the subject identifies with, the expression or representation of pain—and hence of subjectivity—will be a sensuous, natural form of expression. This is why the expression of pain is congenial to art, or why pain is a subject matter that is congenial to artistic representation. Pain stands in continuity with beauty in this respect, because it requires a human sensuous, natural body in order for it to manifest itself—pain is essentially felt by a subject who has a body, an external, natural form of existence, and identifies with it. But at the same time, pain and its expression lie, in relation to beauty, at the opposite end of a spectrum. Beauty is present where a subject experiences an undivided unity with his body or natural form of existence; pain is present, in contrast, where a subject distinguishes himself from his body or natural mode of existence. Thus one could say that pain lies at the very borderline of the sensuous, natural manifestation of spiritual contents. Pain is present precisely where spirit withdraws from its sensuous, natural mode of existence—and the expression of pain is, almost paradoxically, a sensuous, natural expression of the withdrawal of spirit from its sensuous, natural mode. In short, in the expression of pain, the beginning absence of spirit from the sensuous, natural world becomes sensuously present.

These considerations bring us close to a formulation in the *Encyclopedia* in which Hegel gives a characterization of the type of art he calls ‘romantic’. Romantic art presents spirit as ‘disengaging’ itself from externality, Hegel writes here.<sup>4</sup> But spirit is present in externality *as* disengaging from it precisely where the spiritual pain of inner division expresses itself. This suggests that we can understand the type of art Hegel refers to as romantic as essentially revolving around the experience of pain and its expression.<sup>5</sup> I will pursue this hypothesis in the second part of the chapter. Before we turn to Hegel’s conception of romantic art, however, we will start by considering the crucial role that the experience of pain plays in Greek tragedy. In the previous chapter, we discussed the figure of the hero—whose most perfect presentation can be found in Greek tragedy on Hegel’s account—in particular with regard to what makes him a paradigmatic instance of a beautiful individual from Hegel’s point of view. As is well known, Hegel’s favorite example of such a heroic figure is the principle protagonist of Sophocles’s drama *Antigone*. In the present chapter, however, we will see that a tragic figure such as Antigone has another side to her in Hegel’s view, over and above her beauty: insofar as she suffers and experiences pain—and insofar as she is a tragic figure, she must experience some sort of suffering and pain—she exhibits a dimension of depth and subjectivity that she would be lacking if she was merely beautiful. Thus, in the following section, we will look at what may be described as the ‘darker side’ of Antigone: those aspects of her character in virtue of which she is more than just a beautiful heroine.

## TRAGIC EXPERIENCE

### Reconciliation and Justice in Tragedy

The literature on Hegel's theory of tragedy is vast, and many excellent studies on the topic have been published, covering a wide range of aspects of Hegel's discussion of tragedy in both the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Commentators now widely agree that Greek tragedy derives its meaning for Hegel mainly from its relation to Greek ethical life, or to the political reality of the Greek *polis* in which tragic theatre would have been performed. It would certainly be mistaken to hold that Greek tragedy for Hegel renders an accurate, straightforward depiction of the historical reality of life in the *polis*.<sup>6</sup> Instead, it seems more plausible that Greek tragedy offers in Hegel's view a kind of lens through which the ethical powers at work in the actual *polis* can be seen in particularly sharp relief. Thus tragic theatre functions as a critical commentator on the ethical reality of the *polis* for Hegel. In the previous chapter, we touched on Hegel's conception of the fundamental normative claims—or powers representing such claims—which underlie the dynamic of Greek ethical life; in particular, there are two such claims or powers, one pertaining to public, political life, and the good of the community as a whole, and the other pertaining to private, individual life and the good of the family. In Greek tragedy, these fundamental ethical powers are depicted as getting entangled in conflicts, typically conflicts of such a violent sort that they result in the mutual destruction of the combatants. As we also saw in the previous chapter, such conflicts occur under a twofold condition: they occur in the context of a sphere of multiple values, where different ethical claims coexist alongside each other, but only under the further condition that the normative claims associated with these values are defended in a relentless, unconditional, in short, in a heroic fashion. The essential breeding ground for tragic conflicts, in other words, is a combination of a sphere of multiple values on the one hand, and a heroic type of character defending these values on the other hand.<sup>7</sup> Another way of putting the same point: tragic conflicts occur where a multiplicity of values or ethical norms are embodied by beautiful, heroic characters.

One of the rather surprising aspects of Hegel's theory of tragedy is that for all the emphasis Hegel puts on the logic of tragic conflicts, and in particular on the mutual destruction of the two combatants in which such conflicts typically culminate, he nevertheless insists that Greek tragedy transports a positive, uplifting message as well. Tragedy is not just about conflict and mutual destruction for Hegel, but also, and to the same degree, about justice. A tragic conflict occurs where two parties who both defend or represent different legitimate ethical claims both disrespect the legitimacy of the other's claim, and as a consequence are prepared to destroy their opponent in defense of their own claim. Both erroneously take themselves to represent the *ethos* of the community as a whole, whereas in reality they only



represent one part of it. The ensuing spectacle of the opponents' mutual destruction provides evidence for the working of a kind of justice, Hegel holds, because it shows that wherever an individual who represents one particular part of an ethical whole illegitimately lays claim to representing the whole, he will inevitably meet with the fierce opposition of a power defending the other part of the whole. Where Creon disrespects the importance of family bonds and their manifestation in the family members' performance of burial rites for each other, for instance, he kindles the wrath of Antigone who, in turn, defends her right to bury her brother with utter disrespect for the legitimacy of Creon's point of view. In this way, a balance of ethical powers that has been thrown out of kilter is being restored: wherever one ethical power claims more than its due for itself, the other one unfailingly stands up to put it in its place. However, in this tragic scenario, the ethical hubris of one power is met with no lesser hubris in the other—the response to one ethical transgression is always a similarly great transgression. Hence, justice here can only show itself in the mutual destruction of the two ethical opponents.<sup>8</sup>

Tragic justice, therefore, is a negative, dark kind of justice, one that manifests itself in the clash and ensuing annihilation of the tragic protagonists. Nevertheless, Hegel is adamant that the restoration of tragic justice depicted in tragic plays at the same time amounts to a form of reconciliation, and hence ideally has a kind of edificatory effect on the spectators of a Greek tragedy.<sup>9</sup> This is astonishing, because it is not clear to what extent it is possible to speak of reconciliation in association with tragic justice, except in a rather remote sense. To the extent that the tragic protagonists pursue their particular ethical claims relentlessly, remain incapable of appreciating the legitimacy of their opponent's claim and proceed to their mutual destruction, they are certainly not reconciled with each other, nor are they even capable of achieving such reconciliation. Thus, the only possible subject of reconciliation must be someone or something that lies beyond the consciousness of the individual tragic opponents; Hegel calls it the ethical substance, the community and ethical whole of which the individual tragic combatants are but a part.<sup>10</sup> This substance is in a state of tension and inner opposition as long as the tragic conflict unfolds. Once the tragic opponents have destroyed each other, however, the inner balance of the ethical substance has been restored—it has been reconciled with itself, in the sense that those elements in it that brought about a state of imbalance have been eliminated. But this is a reconciliation that happens behind the struggling individuals' backs, in which they have no share—they are nothing but instruments of a dynamic of justice that operates on a higher level beyond their individual intention and ethical perspective.

Many commentators have noted this peculiarity of Hegel's conception of tragic justice and reconciliation: while, on the one hand, emphasizing that tragic conflicts culminate in reconciliation and the restoration of order, Hegel on the other hand seems to imply that this order and reconciliation

is such that it cannot be intentionally brought about or even appreciated and understood by the individuals who are themselves involved in tragic conflicts, the heroes.<sup>11</sup>

Dennis Schmidt, for instance, states that in Hegel's view, the individual tragic heroes are incapable of making a step towards reconciliation with their opponent. Schmidt holds that the mutual destruction of the tragic opponents does lead to a higher order for Hegel that, however, 'individuality as such cannot grasp'.<sup>12</sup> That is to say, this higher order is not recognized or appreciated as 'higher' than their own limited perspective by the individual tragic protagonist. Similarly, Terry Pinkard writes that the tragic conflict consists for Hegel ultimately in a conflict between the tragic opponents on the one hand, and the ethical substance—the 'normative basis' of Greek life—on the other, in the sense that both opponents violate an ethical principle that is constitutive of this basis. Hence the mutual destruction of the tragic opponents can be understood by the spectators of a tragic play as restoring an equilibrium of powers, and hence as bringing about a form of justice. 'Seeing justice done', Pinkard writes, 'affirms [the spectators'] understanding that when the divine and human laws are violated, the system of the world (of Greek life) will be able to right itself and set itself in order again'.<sup>13</sup> But this is not the way the situation presents itself to the tragic protagonists themselves; for both of them, it appears as if they are in conflict with someone who is simply in the wrong. They are not capable of accepting their opponents' position as legitimate, and hence could never appreciate that their *own* suffering and destruction is in fact a manifestation of justice.<sup>14</sup>

Christoph Menke, in contrast, has argued that the tragic protagonists in Hegel's view do undergo a kind of transformation as the tragic conflict unfolds, which brings them at least closer towards reconciliation with their opponent than they were at the beginning of the conflict. According to Menke, the process of transformation that Hegel's tragic protagonists undergo results in the 'reflective decentralization' of the heroes.<sup>15</sup> This means that the heroes begin to detach themselves from their immediate devotion to a particular ethical purpose, and to call their ethical one-sidedness into question. This reflective decentralization of the heroes is indicated through a particular feature of the language of tragic drama on Menke's reading: tragic irony. Tragic irony is present where the tragic protagonist is asserting a position, but in doing so unwittingly points to its opposite. Thus it is a means to tie together into one statement both the tragic protagonist's own ethical position and the one he opposes himself to: while asserting his own ethical claim, the hero simultaneously asserts the claim of his opponent, thereby implicitly distancing himself from his own ethical position and putting it into question.<sup>16</sup> The undisputed master of tragic irony is certainly Sophocles in his *Oedipus Tyrannus*, in which almost every single utterance of the hero Oedipus exhibits a fateful ambiguity through which Oedipus, unwittingly, evokes the opposite of what he is trying to say and points to his imminent doom.<sup>17</sup> The very same statements through which Oedipus

confidently asserts his righteousness reveal the spuriousness of this assertion. However, it is important to note that the dramatic effect of tragic irony rests to a great degree on the fact that the ambiguity of the protagonist's utterances is perceived by the audience, but not by the protagonists themselves. Thus it is essential that the tragic protagonists remain unaware of the double-meaning of their statements, and hence of the fact that as they assert their own ethical position, they put it at the same time into question by simultaneously asserting their opponent's.<sup>18</sup> The presence of tragic irony, therefore, does not seem to be sufficient to indicate the tragic protagonists' openness to a spirit of reconciliation. Tragic irony merely shows that the tragic combatants unwittingly acknowledge their opponent's point of view, without however being yet in a position to realize this implicit acknowledgment. In fact, Menke makes explicit in his discussion that, in his view, genuine acknowledgment of the faultiness and one-sidedness of the heroes' position cannot be achieved *within* tragedy at all; despite their reflective decentralization, the tragic protagonists remain incapable of ascending to an ethical perspective from which genuine reconciliation with their opponent becomes possible.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that Hegel appears to be more concerned with the objective logic of tragic conflicts than with the subjective perspective of the tragic protagonists and their experience is sometimes taken to constitute a serious shortcoming of Hegel's theory. For, it is argued, due to this peculiar focus of Hegel's theory, too little significance is ascribed to the individual protagonist's tragic suffering, and in general to the fact that individual pain and suffering should be considered an essential part of the content of a tragic play. Thus A. C. Bradley cautiously points out that Hegel might be neglecting the significance of the tragic protagonist's experience of suffering:

[Hegel] seems to be right in laying emphasis on the action and conflict in tragedy rather than on the suffering and misfortune. [. . .] But, sufficient connection with these agencies being present, misfortune, the fall from prosperity to adversity, with the suffering attending it, at once becomes tragic; and in many tragedies it forms a large ingredient, as does the pity for it in the tragic feeling. Hegel, I think, certainly takes too little notice of it; and by this omission he also withdraws attention from something the importance of which he would have admitted at once; I mean the way in which suffering is borne.<sup>20</sup>

In a similar vein, Sebastian Gardner has argued that Hegel fails to give a satisfying account of the value of tragedy. Gardner defends the view that at the heart of a tragic conflict lies a subject's experience of his or her opposition to the objective world: '[T]ragedy is constituted by an experience modeled on the traditional, unmediated opposition of subject and object'.<sup>21</sup> It follows that if there is such a thing as tragic value, it must be grounded in the subjective experience undergone by the individual who faces the world in a tragic

conflict. Now, for Hegel, the value of tragedy is grounded in the rationality and justice of the solution to which tragic conflicts necessarily proceed, and the sense of reconciliation that the observation of such a solution affords. However, this rational and just solution is not itself part of the tragic experience of the individual involved in tragic conflict. Therefore, Gardner concludes, Hegel's theory fails to give a satisfying account of tragic value:

Hegel does not demonstrate the attunement of tragic and moral consciousness [i.e., the consciousness that observes and comprehends the rationality and justice of tragic conflict], if this is supposed to belong to the experience of tragedy, and not to be the result of subsequent, extraneous reflection on the experience.<sup>22</sup>

In response to such objections, I want to suggest a perspective on Hegel's theory of tragedy that may help to allay the worry that Hegel fails to ascribe sufficient importance to the painful experiences and suffering undergone by the tragic protagonists. Furthermore, this perspective will also reveal a way in which we can see something like tragic reconciliation becoming experienceable by the tragic protagonists themselves, instead of merely operating behind their backs and at the cost of their destruction and perishing. Central to this perspective is Hegel's conception of pain, as sketched in the first section of this chapter: the experience of pain, according to this conception, is essentially an experience of both unity and opposition or division, or rather of division and opposition within unity. Pain can only be present where an individual both identifies with and distinguishes himself from an immediate, natural form of being. As he distinguishes himself from this form of being, he experiences pain, and thereby comes to experience his unity with it. I want to suggest that with Hegel we can understand the kind of pain that lies at the heart of tragic suffering as a paradigmatic example of pain understood as a manifestation of unity within division. Tragic suffering arises for Hegel essentially from the pain of being irredeemably divided from something one identifies with at the same time. It therefore turns out, after all, that pain and suffering is the very medium through which individual tragic protagonists can experience a sort of unity with their opponent, in Hegel's view, and hence a form of reconciliation—even though, to be sure, this reconciliation is inextricably linked with an experience of painful division.

### Antigone's Tragic Experience

Since my suggestion revolves around Hegel's understanding of the subjective experience of tragic events, in particular of the experience of tragic suffering, the main source of my argument is Hegel's discussion of tragedy in the Spirit chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Here, Hegel is concerned primarily with the phenomenology of a tragic conflict, that is, with the way such a conflict is experienced 'from the inside', by a subject who

gets entangled in it. As is well known, the figure who serves Hegel in the *Phenomenology*—and elsewhere—as the primary illustration of what kind of experiences a tragic protagonist typically has to undergo is the heroine of Sophocles's play *Antigone*. Accordingly, the greatest part of the following argument consists in a reconstruction of what Antigone's tragic suffering consists in according to Hegel's reading of Sophocles's play in the *Phenomenology*, and of how we are to understand its meaning from Hegel's point of view.<sup>23</sup>

At first sight, Hegel presents Antigone as a heroine who is unconditionally devoted to her particular ethical task, the burial of her brother, and prepared to sacrifice her own life for the successful pursuit of this task. It is this unconditional devotion that makes Antigone beautiful, in accordance with Hegel's notion of beauty as developed in the previous chapters. For Antigone's devotion to the task of burying her brother has become second nature for her: it is a task to which she is devoted in an immediate, unreflective, in short, in a heroic way. When Antigone reflects on her actions and the reasons underlying them she usually describes herself as obeying a 'divine law'. Characteristic of this law, from Antigone's point of view, is that it holds unconditionally, that is, it requires her to bury her brother *under any circumstance*. This self-perception of Antigone as subject to an unconditional ethical law is a reflection of the moral psychology of the hero discussed in the previous chapter: as a heroine, Antigone is unconditionally devoted to pursuing a particular course of action, and will always consider it an ethical transgression not to act in this way. Furthermore, the ethical law Antigone takes herself to be subject to, in Antigone's perception, is not man-made and has nothing to do with the human laws that are issued by a political community and binding for its members. Rather, Antigone holds that the law she embodies is ultimately a divine law, while she understands the gods as ethical authorities who are entirely separate and detached from the political sphere.<sup>24</sup> If we put these two aspects together—that Antigone takes herself to be unconditionally bound by the divine law, and that she takes it to define an ethical sphere separate from and independent of the ethical sphere of the community—we arrive at the result that Antigone will not be able to appreciate the legitimacy of an ethical claim grounded in political laws, should it imply a violation of the divine law she is committed to. The divine law is unconditionally binding in Antigone's view, and if it stands in conflict with a political, human law, so much the worse for the latter—this merely shows that the human law, as it demands a violation of the divine law, is illegitimate in this instance. Accordingly, Antigone cannot accept Creon's demand that Polynices, as a traitor, remain unburied. This ethical inflexibility, this incapacity to accept any ethical claim as legitimate that stands in conflict with one's own, constitutes the downside of heroic and beautiful strength of will, as we have seen in the previous chapter.

One might ask at this point how Antigone comes to know about the divine law and what it tells her to do. Does she stand in some kind of special

and exclusive relationship to the gods? Apparently not, or in any case she never mentions anything to this effect. Instead, Antigone seems to assume that everyone in the city knows about the divine law she is following, and that everyone, likewise, respects this law (except for Creon, of course). This becomes obvious when one looks at the way Antigone justifies her action vis-à-vis others. In her opening encounter with her sister Ismene, Antigone makes it clear that she expects her intended action to bring her glory or, more specifically, the great honor of a glorious death, of being made immortal through the praise and memory of the community. As the only one in the city who dares to remain loyal to the divine law—the law that family members are to be buried—even in the face of Creon's decree, she will sacrifice her life for the sake of averting the wrath of the gods from the city. Her reward, she reckons, will be posthumous glory.<sup>25</sup> This is not to say that Antigone is *motivated* to bury her brother primarily by the expectation of a posthumous reward—on the contrary, she buries him simply because she considers it right to do so. However, her expectation to be backed—and therefore, after her death, glorified—by the community plays an important role in how she *determines* what she considers right: even an action in accord with the divine law will count as right for her only insofar as it will also be endorsed by the community, and therefore bring her glory. The endorsement of the community functions as a constraint or limit on what can count as an action in accord with the divine law from Antigone's point of view. Hence the divine law that Antigone takes herself to be obeying is a well-known, open, public law, rather than something private and exclusively accessible to Antigone herself. Only for this reason is it sensible for Antigone to expect that her action in accord with the divine law will bring her posthumous glory: it is impossible to gain such glory independently of the community, for it is the community who must bestow it. But if the divine law is a public law that is known and, in principle, respected by the whole community, it follows that it will be possible for Antigone to be wrong about what the divine law demands—she has no privileged, private access to it. Moreover, one way for her to find out whether she is right about what the divine law demands is to look whether her action, which she takes to be demanded by the divine law, is in fact endorsed by the rest of the community or not.<sup>26</sup>

Antigone herself is apparently not fully aware of how much her own judgment of right and wrong is ultimately mediated by or dependent on the agreement of the community. She clearly thinks of the divine law as something that comes immediately and straight from the gods, rather than being determined to some extent *within* the political community, without reflecting on how, if this was the case, she (and everyone else) might have come to know about it. Thus, Antigone is to some extent ignorant of the source of her ethical knowledge. In this respect, she lacks self-knowledge. But Antigone's mistaken assumption that she is acting on behalf of an ethical instance that is totally alien and external to the political community is also, eventually, what spurs her determination to oppose Creon, the political authority. If

she did not think that she and her ethical vocation were somehow exempt from the political context altogether, she would probably be more considerate, and think twice about whether there is not something legitimate, even from her point of view, at least, in the intention behind Creon's decree that Polynices is to be left unburied—the intention, presumably, to protect the city from future traitors. Instead, Antigone thinks of herself as a lone warrior in the name of the divine law. Since political action and the honor and glory that may be associated with it are usually considered a strictly male business in the political community in which Antigone lives, one might also describe this inconsistency within Antigone's character by saying that unbeknown to herself, Antigone has a masculine side to her: whereas on the one hand she is driven by a devotion to her family that would have been considered as appropriate for a female member of the ethical community, she is on the other hand a fearless, courageous warrior, ready to lose her life to gain honor and glory. This masculine side of Antigone is also recognized by Creon, who becomes particularly eager to subject Antigone to merciless punishment when he realizes that otherwise, she might turn out to be more of a man than himself.<sup>27</sup>

However, Antigone ultimately becomes painfully aware of this tension inherent in her character. After her exchange with Creon, she addresses the chorus, who represents the community as a whole, in order to assure herself of its loyalty—but instead she finds herself rejected. Instead of confirming that her action was legitimate, the chorus accuses her of having acted too recklessly and stubbornly, and denies her the glory she had been hoping for. It is at this point that Antigone's tragic suffering begins: she realizes with horror that she is destined to die a lonesome and pathetic, rather than a glorious, death, and is devastated. Suddenly, she is afraid of dying, as there is now no longer any value related to her death for her.<sup>28</sup> But the suffering that now begins for Antigone also has an important consequence for her in that she learns something through it. In realizing that being rejected by the community *makes her suffer*, Antigone understands, after all, that there has been something political about her ethical orientation all along. She understands that in her uncompromising opposition to the political cause, she has implicitly opposed herself to something that constitutes an essential part of her identity without being aware of it: the law that she follows (the 'divine law') is essentially a law that is respected by or valid within the community, otherwise it would cease to have any claim on or validity for her. In feeling the pain of ostracism from the community, Antigone understands that being part of the community does matter to her, and that being ostracized is considered by her as a sign of having failed. Thus Antigone's suffering is the key to her own self-understanding: through the pain she feels as she finds herself rejected by the community she learns that belonging to the community and being respected by it does matter to her. Hegel alludes to this relation between tragic suffering and self-knowledge in the *Phenomenology* when he cites the following declaration of Antigone from Sophocles' play:



'Because we suffer we acknowledge we have erred'.<sup>29</sup> Through her suffering, Antigone is forced to give up her one-sided, unconditional devotion to one particular law, Hegel writes; she learns to acknowledge the opposite law as belonging to her own ethical nature and identity.<sup>30</sup>

We can now see how Antigone's tragic suffering is in accord with Hegel's conception of pain as a unity experienced as division, or division experienced as unity. Antigone opposes herself to the political community and its values, as she considers herself as pursuing a mission that takes her entirely outside of the ethical sphere of the community. But once she comes to experience her categorical opposition to the political community as painful, she realizes that participating in the community and being respected by it is, after all, an important part of her own identity—through her pain, she experiences her unity with the ethical sphere from which she had cut herself off. Antigone's experience of pain, her tragic suffering, is thus an experience of unity within division, or of unity with that from which she has separated herself through her own action.

While Antigone appears at first sight as a straightforward beautiful heroine, it has now emerged that there is another dimension to her character from Hegel's point of view. On the one hand, she identifies with a particular ethical law in an immediate and unconditional way, in the sense that following this law has become her second nature. But on the other hand, she also identifies with another ethical law in a more complex, less immediate sense: namely, by opposing herself to it and experiencing her unity with it as a form of pain.

To the extent that she does experience her rejection from the political community as painful, we can therefore also say that Antigone has been reconciled, through her suffering, with the ethical power that she initially perceives as her categorical opponent. 'Because we suffer we acknowledge we have erred', as Hegel puts it: precisely through her suffering, Antigone experiences her own identity as being inextricably linked with the normative claims that were initially beyond and outside of her ethical perspective, and hence comes to respect and endorse these claims. Because the experience of pain, within Hegel's account, is only possible where there is an underlying unity (which is at the same time disrupted), Hegel's account allows us to see the experience of pain as an indication of reconciliation. To be sure, this is a form of reconciliation that is not 'livable' in the sense that it could manifest itself in Antigone's future actions, or enable her to settle the conflict with Creon and intentionally restore peace and order in the community. Rather, this form of reconciliation, reconciliation manifesting itself in pain, essentially occurs at a point at which irredeemable damage has been done. At this point, Antigone has maneuvered herself into a position in which she is irrevocably ostracized from the community, and it is thus too late for her to try to manifest her newly gained ethical insight in her actions. Precisely this separation from the community causes her pain, and hence makes her feel unified with the community after all.



Nevertheless, what is important for our argument is that this is a form of reconciliation that is experienced by Antigone herself, rather than happening merely behind her back and being observable, at best, by those who watch her perish in her violent encounter with Creon. In virtue of her tragic suffering, Antigone is not merely an unwitting instrument of a dynamic of tragic justice operating on a level beyond her individual consciousness, but a subject who experiences reconciliation with her former opponent. This result also allows us to answer the objection raised by Gardner and Bradley, namely that Hegel fails to do justice to the significance of tragic suffering and to provide a proper account of its meaning. On the contrary, it is through the suffering of the tragic heroes that the possibility of reconciliation enters the heroes' own subjective perspective and becomes experienceable from their point of view. Suffering and pain is the essential mode in which reconciliation is experienced by subjects involved in tragic conflicts.<sup>31</sup>

There is also a sense in which Antigone ascends to a higher level of subjectivity and reflexivity through her painful experience. The suffering Antigone is no longer a heroine who can be straightforwardly associated with one particular ethical principle that constitutes her second nature, the substance of her character. Antigone endorses what she conceives of as the 'divine law', but through her suffering she realizes that she can no longer identify with it in an unconditional, absolute way. The divine law continues to be valid for her, but only under the condition that what the gods demand is also accepted within the community. She has acquired the capacity to negate, under certain conditions, an ethical claim arising from the divine law. Thus Antigone has come to acknowledge both spheres of ethical value, the divine and the political one, and at the same time she has ceased to absolutely identify with either one of the two. What has formerly constituted her being and identity has now been transformed into something that she acknowledges and endorses, but from which she can also distance herself. Her relation to the ethical principles she endorses has become more reflective, less immediate.

This increase in subjectivity also implies the loss of Antigone's beauty. The beauty of Antigone's character consists precisely in the fact that an ethical principle constitutes its substance and defines its limits, such that she unconditionally identifies with this principle that unfailingly manifests itself in her actions. The principle constitutes her second nature, in other words, such that her character embodies a unity of ethical will and individual human nature. Once she begins to distance herself from this principle, however, and to acknowledge the validity of the principle defended by her opponent, this unity of character or individual nature and ethical principle is broken up and interrupted. Antigone now no longer *is* the divine law or embodies it, but merely acknowledges and endorses it as one among other ethical principles; she has acquired the ability to distance herself from it and negate it. This rupture within Antigone's character, which implies the loss of its beauty, is grounded in her experience of pain and tragic suffering.

Through the pain Antigone experiences, she ascends to a mode of endorsing or acknowledging an ethical principle that is no longer based on immediate identification, but which implies division and distance. The presence of such division and distance, while indicating a level of subjectivity and reflection that is absent in a straightforwardly beautiful character, also marks the absence of the kind of undisrupted unity of spirit and nature that is constitutive of beauty.

## PAIN IN ROMANTIC ART

In the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel makes the following statement about the form of art that he calls ‘romantic’:

But the other mode of incongruity between the Idea and the figuration is this: the infinite form, subjectivity, is not, as in that first extreme, only superficial personality, but the inmost depth, and the god is known not as merely seeking its shape or satisfying himself in an external shape, but as finding himself only within himself, thus assuming his adequate shape in the spiritual alone. So art, *romantic* art, gives up the task of showing the god as such in external shape and by means of beauty; it displays him as only condescending to appearance, and presents the divine as inwardness in the externality from which it disengages itself.<sup>32</sup>

When Hegel speaks here of an ‘other mode of incongruity between the Idea and the figuration’, he is implicitly referring to symbolic art, the historical predecessor of the form of art in which beauty comes to fruition, classical art. We have not discussed symbolic art in detail, but we have seen in chapter 1 that Hegel wants to understand symbolic representation as standing in contrast to the self-signifying sign in which the beautiful figure consists. Symbolic representation functions on the basis of a partial difference between the symbol and what it symbolizes. In contrast, in the self-signifying sign, the sign and what it signifies are identical—the self-signifying sign signifies only itself. The paradigmatic case of a self-signifying sign, for Hegel, is the unity of soul and body, spirit and nature, or inner and outer, which is embodied by the human individual.

The above passage suggests that like the symbolic expression of spirit, its romantic expression also involves an inadequacy between form and content, between the sign and what it signifies. But it is a different kind of inadequacy, and the grounds for this inadequacy must certainly be sought in the fact that romantic inadequacy is a post-beautiful, rather than a pre-beautiful inadequacy of form and content. The romantic spirit is one that is about to leave its unity with a sensuous natural body behind. In the quotation above, Hegel expresses this by saying that the romantic spirit is one that gives up on beauty and withdraws from its external manifestation. The challenge in

understanding Hegel's conception of romantic art, then, is to make sense of the paradoxical notion that spirit *as* withdrawing or dividing itself from its external manifestation, its sensuous, natural body, is nevertheless somehow to be presented or expressed in sensuous natural form. Somehow, the imminent absence of spirit from the sensuous world is to be made sensuously present. This paradoxical idea is also made explicit in a passage from the *Aesthetics*:

The material (*der Stoff*) is now no longer supposed to express the inner (*die Innerlichkeit*), but it is meant to make inwardness (*Innigkeit*) appear, that is to say, it is supposed to simultaneously express that the external is not satisfactory. Inwardness implies an opposition to external existence.<sup>33</sup>

Hegel here introduces a distinction between *Innerlichkeit* and *Innigkeit*. What he seems to have in mind is that '*Innigkeit*' refers to a particularly strong, peculiar form of subjectivity. What is '*innig*' is not just an inner, mental state, such as a mood or emotion, which may also be expressed externally. Rather, '*Innigkeit*' implies a feeling of dissatisfaction with the external mode of expression in general, a negative reaction towards externality. It is this negative reaction towards externality that is to manifest itself externally in romantic art.

My suggestion is that Hegel's conception of pain as a manifestation of unity within division, or of division within unity, is central to his understanding of romantic art. Pain occurs where spirit opposes itself to or withdraws from an external, bodily, natural mode of existence, which however still belongs to it. This withdrawal is therefore experienced as painful, and the external expression of pain is precisely an external expression of spirit's intention to withdraw from externality. In the following statement on pain in romantic art, Hegel expresses this idea in a particularly concise way:

Pain is caused by the fact that this naturalness belongs to the spiritual existence; therefore something is negated which belongs to this spiritual existence. This means that pain is essential to the spiritual; it is the point of transition to free spirituality.<sup>34</sup>

By considering pain as a key phenomenon in romantic art, we can thus make sense of Hegel's paradoxical characterization of this form of art. Because it revolves around the expression of pain, romantic art can be understood as making externally manifest spirit's negative attitude towards external manifestation. The expression of pain just is an external manifestation of spirit's negation of externality. Furthermore, the presence of pain is also essentially a phenomenon occurring *after* beauty. Spirit first has to be embodied and unified with an external mode of existence in order to then be able to withdraw from and oppose itself to it. The inadequacy between spiritual content

and the sensuous natural form that is characteristic of romantic art has to be preceded by a unity of form and content—only then can it be experienced as painful. This, then, constitutes the difference between the symbolic and the romantic inadequacy of form and content: only the latter presupposes a preceding unity of spirit and natural form, from which spirit now begins to withdraw. In symbolic representation, in contrast, content and form are external to each other without ever having been unified.<sup>35</sup>

It is, however, not my intention to provide an exhaustive account of Hegel's conception of romantic art. Romantic art is a protean concept in Hegel, comprising secular as well as religious manifestations, and ultimately petering out into various forms of late romantic art, in whose description some commentators have interpreted Hegel as anticipating certain streams of modern, post-Hegelian art. My aim is merely to throw the spotlight on one particular aspect of Hegel's account of romantic art, which is specifically relevant for making sense of the paradoxical characterization of this form of art that Hegel offers in the *Encyclopedia*. Furthermore, this way of approaching Hegel's conception of romantic art also allows us to see it as a form of art to which very essence it belongs to reject beauty as its ultimate aim. As I have argued above, the onset of pain always marks the withering of beauty within Hegel's account. Thus romantic art rejects beauty as it embraces the expression of pain, and vice versa—the expression of pain in romantic art is a mode of the rejection of beauty.

We have seen above that for Hegel there is a crucial relation between the endurance of pain and subjectivity. As spirit endures the pain of opposing itself to its natural, external manifestation, it develops a dimension of subjectivity and inwardness that it lacks as long as it is fully united with its natural, external mode of being. However, as the above quotation from the *Encyclopedia* makes clear, Hegel understands the stage at which the romantic spirit endures pain as a merely transitional one in its ascent to full subjectivity. Spirit inflicts pain upon itself by opposing itself to its own external manifestation. But it does so only in order to ultimately free itself from its external manifestation altogether, to withdraw fully into itself and 'assuming [its] adequate shape in the spiritual alone'.<sup>36</sup> Pain, in other words, has to be understood as having an aim that lies beyond it, in a purely spiritual mode of existence. It is not an end in itself, but merely a point of transition.

We can illuminate these ideas by looking at the imagery in which they are conveyed in romantic art, according to Hegel. This imagery is primarily Christian, religious imagery, since romantic art is first and foremost Christian art for Hegel, even though it later also develops a secular strand. In Christian art, pain and its expression and representation play an extraordinarily important role. Central to it is the figure of Christ, who sacrifices himself by enduring infinite pain on the cross. But even apart from the figure of Christ, depictions of pain are ubiquitous in Christian art: in the mother of Christ weeping for her son, in the groups of disciples and friends mourning

for Christ, and furthermore in the numerous depictions of martyrs submitting themselves to all kinds of hideous and cruel tortures. At first sight, this prevalence of pain in Christian art may make it appear repugnant. However, the pain depicted in Christian art has a fundamental spiritual meaning according to Hegel's account. The martyrs' pain, including the passion of Christ, is, in a certain sense, self-inflicted: they submit to it on purpose and deliberately sacrifice their life and bodily integrity. In doing so, they intentionally oppose themselves to their external, natural mode of being and thus demonstrate their willingness to overcome it. As Hegel puts it in the *Aesthetics*: 'For by wresting themselves from naturalness, stripping it away from them as something null and void, and subjugating themselves to themselves (*sich sich selbst unterwerfen*), they pass through the pain of this separation'.<sup>37</sup> But by passing through the pain of separation, they also hope to gain something, Hegel writes: '[T]hey pass through the pain of this separation and thus reach reconciliation, spirit and in it peace with themselves'.<sup>38</sup> Precisely by renouncing their naturalness, their external mode of being, the martyrs hope to ascend to a purely spiritual mode of existence. The negation of their natural existence thus implies for them at the same time a transition to a higher mode of being.<sup>39</sup> In this way,

[t]he grief and death of the dying individual reverses into a return to self, into satisfaction, blessedness, and that reconciled affirmative existence which spirit can attain only through the killing of its negative existence in which it is barred from its proper truth and life.<sup>40</sup>

From the Christian point of view, the state of subjectivity-beyond-pain to which the Christian martyrs are supposed to ascend is best described as a spiritual unity with God after the death of one's natural body. Hegel himself prefers to refer to this state as the state of 'free spirituality', of spirit's 'return to itself' into an 'intellectual' world in which it is free.<sup>41</sup> Whatever one thinks of this notion of a purely intellectual mode of existence, or spiritual unity with God, a subjectivity that lies beyond pain and division and in which spirit is reconciled with itself, it is clear that in Hegel's view it can only be reached by passing through a state of pain and division; the endurance of pain and division is an essential precondition of subjectivity. But it is precisely the capacity and willingness to endure this pain that distinguishes the Christian saint from the classical Greek hero, the epitome of beauty.<sup>42</sup> Hegel makes this contrast explicit:

It belongs essentially to inwardness as the principle of spiritual subjectivity, which creates its own existence for itself in spirit, that the soul is not as in the Greek god immediately poured out (*ergossen*) into its bodily shape, is not fully expressible in this shape, does not live blessedly (*selig*) in it and manifest itself in it in its totality. On the contrary, it is here necessary that the soul, as it appears in a body, at the same time

shows itself as having returned from this body into itself, and as living in itself, instead in the body.<sup>43</sup>

Again, Hegel here describes the main characteristic of beauty as consisting of the inability or unwillingness of the beautiful figure to give up on the natural body or bodily shape into which it is 'poured out' and in which it lives 'blessedly'. In the Christian martyrs, the willingness to endure pain even goes so far as to be turned into a willingness to face death, to sacrifice one's natural body entirely. Accordingly, the shortcoming of the beautiful figure can also be described as an incapacity to face or accept death.<sup>44</sup> The beautiful figure cannot embrace or accept the death of its natural body, because it identifies with this body, it is fully manifest in it and does not distinguish itself from it. By giving up on this body, it would give up on itself.

Pain marks the outer boundary of spirit's connection with a sensuous natural body, a connection that remains even where spirit has begun to separate itself from the body. Accordingly, the expression of pain marks the outer boundary of what can still be expressed in a sensuous natural body. However, as we have seen, pain constitutes merely a point of transition in the development of subjectivity, both for Hegel and from the romantic Christian point of view. In the state in which the endurance of pain is ultimately supposed to result, the connectedness with a sensuous natural body is to have been altogether overcome—spirit is then supposed to have completed its 'return into itself'. The question therefore arises whether the artistic expression of *this* spiritual state is in some sense problematic from Hegel's point of view; this might be the case if, in Hegel's view, the artistic expression of a spiritual content was always grounded in its manifestation in a sensuous natural body. Some of Hegel's statements suggest in fact that precisely where the romantic spirit 'returns into itself', other 'media' than art, in particular Christian religion, become more adequate to capture the relevant spiritual contents in his view.<sup>45</sup> It should be noted that this does not necessarily commit Hegel to the view that art has to give way to Christian religion or be replaced by it. Stephen Houlgate, for instance, holds that art is less adequate to capture certain spiritual contents—pure inwardness, free spirituality<sup>46</sup>—than Christian religion (or indeed philosophy) in Hegel's view, but that it nevertheless cannot be replaced by the latter. For, Houlgate argues, as sensuous human beings, we have an essential need to sensuously intuit the truth, in spite of the ultimate inadequacy of such intuition. Such a sensuous intuition of the truth is offered only by art, which therefore cannot be substituted by a medium that operates independently of sensuous intuition.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, there are also numerous passages in Hegel suggesting the stronger reading that where art becomes inadequate for the expression of the relevant spiritual contents, it should be replaced by or give way to religion (and, ultimately, philosophy) in Hegel's view. In the *Encyclopedia*, for instance, Hegel writes that 'beautiful art has its future in genuine religion',<sup>48</sup> and in the *Aesthetics* that 'from art we proceed to philosophy'.<sup>49</sup>

Accordingly, it has been argued that Hegel's view on the inadequacy of art to capture and convey the content of Christian religion underlies his famous thesis that art comes to an end.<sup>50</sup>

However, the thesis that for Hegel art is inadequate to capture the spiritual content towards which the romantic spirit is essentially striving—a mode of spirit in which the spirit is no longer tied to external, natural manifestation—is not uncontroversial. Brigitte Hilmer suggests that this content can be adequately represented in art from Hegel's point of view if we understand it as consisting in a form of intersubjectivity, or more specifically, the intersubjectivity that is present in love. Where two individuals love each other, one individual identifies with the other, or finds himself manifest in the other. Hegel writes:

Love is nothing but that consciousness forgets itself in an other consciousness, lets its personality die away in the other, and precisely finds itself, possesses itself therein. Insofar as spirit exists in this immediate way as a process, in which the individual consciousness is in an other, and possesses itself due to having given itself up in unity with the other, it is what we call love.<sup>51</sup>

In love, individuals find their identity in an other who is a spiritual other, another consciousness, rather than in an external, natural mode of existence.<sup>52</sup> Thus we can say that where love is present, spirit manifests itself and becomes for-itself in a purely spiritual medium. Besides pain, love—both in its religious and secular forms—constitutes indeed one of the central topics of romantic art in Hegel's view. According to Hilmer, we should see the transition from the representation of pain to the representation of love in romantic art with Hegel as a 'paradigm shift': from externality to otherness, from the solitary individuality of the classical work to intersubjectivity.<sup>53</sup> If we follow Hilmer's suggestion, and accept that the state of pure spirituality or inwardness, in relation to which romantic pain constitutes merely a point of transition, can be understood as existing in the intersubjectivity of love, it turns out that art, insofar as it can come up with adequate images or representations of love, can convey the essence of the romantic spirit as a whole. On this reading, art at its romantic stage does not turn out to be inadequate to grasp and convey spirit after all, for Hegel, but rather carries out a paradigm shift through which a new spiritual content is opened up for it.

We do not need to take a stance on this issue here because our concern at this point is not so much how Hegel defines the limits of art, but rather how he defines the limits of beauty. The preceding discussion has rendered support to the thesis that pain marks a limit of beauty in Hegel's view: beauty consists in a state of undisturbed unity of spirit and nature, or soul and body, in which the inner division that lies at the heart of the experience of pain has no place. Romantic art, by making pain one of its central topics, moves beyond beauty.



## CONCLUSION

I argued that with Hegel we can understand pain—in particular the pain of inner division—as emerging precisely at the boundary of beauty. In the present chapter, we looked at two instances in which art moves beyond beauty by embracing pain and its expression as a central topic. On the one hand, the heroic characters of Greek tragedy leave their beautiful unity and immediate identification with a particular ethical principle behind, like Antigone, by experiencing a particular kind of pain and suffering. On the other hand, the spirit's withdrawal from its beautiful embodiment is depicted in romantic art through the expression of pain.

In light of our preceding discussion, this distancing of art from the aesthetic human ideal through the depiction of pain can be understood as a reaction to the flaw or tension inherent in this ideal: because this ideal is flawed, it has to be left behind as an artistic paradigm. In the next chapter, we will consider whether art, as it abandons the aesthetic human ideal, necessarily has to cease to be beautiful.

## NOTES

1. VAI, 21–22/LAI, 433–34.
2. Enz., § 382.
3. See *ibid.*, § 412.
4. *Ibid.*, § 562.
5. Furthermore, Hegel writes in Enz., § 562 that romantic art essentially turns away from beauty: romantic art ‘gives up the task of showing God as such in external shape and by means of beauty’. This renders further support to the thesis that pain begins where beauty ends and vice versa.
6. See Houlgate 2007b, 148.
7. While Hegel does not hold that conflicts of the kind depicted in Greek tragedy actually occur in the historical Greek *polis*, he certainly thinks that the *polis* lacks the adequate political institutions in order to achieve a proper mediation and reconciliation between the two fundamental ethical claims that together constitute the *ethos* of the *polis* (and that are identical with the ethical powers that are shown as getting entangled in conflicts in the Greek tragedies). Thus in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel argues that the historical decline of the *polis* begins once the Greeks start to put greater emphasis on the good of the individual subject, as opposed to the good of the community as a whole. Where the ‘principle of subjectivity’ gains importance in the Greek culture, it begins to pose a threat to the unity of the *polis*, because it tends to undermine the citizens’ identification with the community. This suggests that even though, in Hegel’s view, there are no heroic and tragic clashes occurring between the two fundamental ethical powers in the actual *polis*, the historical Greek culture nevertheless understands these powers as standing essentially in an antagonistic relation to each other. In the Greek culture, the principle of subjectivity can gain importance only to the detriment of the principle of community—the Greeks have not yet contrived a way to genuinely reconcile these two different ethical claims. Hegel clearly thinks that such reconciliation is possible only in the context of the modern state and its institutions. See VPG, 326–28/LPH, 278–80.



8. VAI, 526/LAI, 1198; Phän., § 472.
9. See VAI, 526/LAI, 1198.
10. Phän., § 472.
11. It should be noted, however, that in addition to the tragic heroes, there is another protagonist present in the tragedy who, in Hegel's view, is not subject to the same limitation of perspective as the heroes: the chorus. The chorus typically represents the political community in whose context the heroes are acting, but it refrains from action itself (this aspect is often underlined by the fact that it consists of a group of persons who are exempt from active, public life, such as elderly men or young women), and instead is present on stage as an observer, and as a judge. What is striking about the chorus is that it fails to take sides with either one of the tragic opponents and their positions. Instead, it is aware that both of the conflicting sides are justified in their action, at least to some extent, but that both are also wrong or misguided with regard to the kind of devotion they show; as this is an immediate devotion in the mode of second nature, such devotion makes an agent incapable of respecting the legitimacy of their opponent's course of action. As a result, the judgment issued by the chorus tends to waver and oscillate, one moment siding with one of the tragic heroes, another moment siding with his opponent (see Menke 1996, 85–93). The chorus therefore occupies a somewhat ambiguous position in the tragic drama. On the one hand, it serves as a reminder of the necessity of reconciling the opposite positions defended and put into action by the tragic protagonists—it thus stands above the individual heroes by recognizing, in contrast to them, the faultiness of their immediate and unconditional devotion to a cause that is, nevertheless, ethically worthy in itself. On the other hand, the chorus is incapable of realizing or putting into practice the ideal of reconciliation for which it stands: not only does it abstain from action itself, but it fails to interfere in any way with the action it is confronted with—it makes no or very little attempt to mediate between the tragic opponents, or to work towards a possible reconciliation between them. Nevertheless, the chorus is of great importance for Hegel, as a defender—albeit a somewhat impotent one—of the ideal of reconciliation. It is interesting in this context that Hegel seems to have changed his mind on the significance of the chorus in the tragic play. At some places in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel speaks rather disparagingly of the chorus, describing it as a fearful, passive, trembling, wavering group of elders (see Phän., §734). In the later *Lectures on Aesthetics*, in contrast, Hegel advocates a decidedly positive reading: the chorus, standing in the background of the fighting and colliding heroes, is here said to represent the essential ground and soil from which the tragic heroes emerge, the 'ethical substance', by which Hegel means the fundamental values of the community to which the tragic heroes belong. Thus in contrast to the *Phenomenology*, Hegel emphasizes here that the chorus has an important role to play in the tragic drama by pointing to a perspective beyond the limited, particular ones held by the individual heroes, from which the ideal of reconciliation can at least be envisaged (see Aesth. 1823, 303; Aesth. 1826, 231).
12. Schmidt 2001, 89–121.
13. Pinkard 1989, 145.
14. Ibid., 144. In a similar vein, Stephen Houlgate argues that according to Hegel's analysis, the tragic protagonists are incapable of letting go of their one-sided perspective, and hence of advancing towards some sort of reconciliation with their opponent—if they relent at all, they must be commanded and forced to do so by a higher power. See Houlgate 2007b, 164.
15. Menke 1996, 93.
16. Ibid., 93–104.

17. Menke sees the same tragic irony as in *Oedipus* at work in *Antigone* as well: as he writes, Antigone's reference to her own *nomos* always points to the law that Creon refers to; see *ibid.*, 99.
18. Martin Donougho raises this point as an objection against Menke (see Donougho 2006, 158). It is not clear, however, that Menke takes the tragic protagonists *themselves* to take an ironic stance to their own actions, and to be aware of the ambiguity of their statements.
19. Menke 1996, 104–11.
20. Bradley 1961, 81–82.
21. Gardner 2002, 242.
22. *Ibid.*, 243.
23. In fact, the reading of *Antigone* developed below cannot be found explicitly in Hegel. Rather, I here attempt to offer a Hegelian reading of *Antigone* that complements Hegel's own discussion in such a way that it allows us to fully understand his statement on the significance of tragic suffering in § 470 of the *Phenomenology*, quoted in the following pages.
24. Antigone, 505–508. In PhR, §166, Hegel refers to this instance of Antigone citing 'an eternal law of which no one knows when it came'.
25. Antigone, 82–93; see also *ibid.*, 498–512.
26. We already touched on this aspect of Antigone's ethical determination in the previous chapter when we observed that the figure of the hero essentially has a twofold nature for Hegel: the hero not only embodies his own ethical will, but also purports to represent and be in agreement with the ethical will of the community as a whole. Accordingly, Antigone will only consider as right what will be accepted by the community as a whole as a representation of its will.
27. Antigone, 540–41.
28. See *ibid.*, 839–943. See also Nussbaum 2001, 66, on this aspect of Antigone's transformation.
29. Phän., § 470. See also Aesth. 1823, 307.
30. Phän., §§ 470–71. See also Aesth. 1823, 306.
31. One might raise the question, however, to what extent Antigone and the experience she undergoes might be a singular case, or whether it is possible to describe tragic experience in *general* as following the structure outlined above. I have argued elsewhere that the structure of Antigone's tragic experience and suffering is exemplified in other Greek tragedies, and even in some modern ones, such that the example of Antigone can be used as the basis of a general Hegelian theory of tragic experience. See Peters 2011.
32. Enz., § 562.
33. Aesth. 1823, 182.
34. Aesth. 1826, 136.
35. See Hegel's characterization of symbolic art in Enz., § 561:

Beyond the completion of *beauty* in *classical* art attained in such reconciliation lies the art of *sublimity*, *symbolic* art, in which the figuration suitable to the Idea is not yet found; the thought, going forth and struggling with the shape, is displayed as a negative attitude towards it, while at the same time it endeavors to embody itself in the shape. The meaning, the content, thereby shows that it has not yet reached the infinite form, that it is not yet known as free spirit and not yet conscious of itself as free spirit.

36. *Ibid.*, § 562.
37. Aesth. 1823, 187. Hegel recognizes that expressing this spiritual dimension of the martyrs' pain constitutes an artistic challenge. The danger is that the tortures endured by the martyrs may appear merely as an 'external story'; that is, as something that merely affects their physical being, and furthermore as

something that merely happens to them, rather than being actively pursued and embraced. Where this occurs, the depiction of pain has in fact no artistic value for Hegel. See *ibid.*, 188; *Aesth.* 1826, 138–39.

38. *Aesth.* 1823, 187.

39. From the Christian point of view, this ascent to a higher, spiritual mode of being can at the same time be understood as a way to escape eternal condemnation, and thus a form of death that is far more drastic than anything the Greeks would have envisaged; see *VAIL*, 134/*LAI*, 522; *Aesth.* 1823, 181. The martyrs can therefore be seen as accepting one kind of loss—the loss of their natural lives, the integrity of their natural bodies—in order to avoid a loss that would be even more severe, eternal condemnation. For from the Christian point of view, it is often a person's strong attachment to their natural body and its needs and desires that constitutes a reason for their eternal damnation. See also Hilmer 1997, 194–95.

40. *VAIL*, 135/*LAI*, 523–24.

41. *Aesth.* 1823, 179. Brigitte Hilmer also emphasizes that the transition of subjectivity-as-pain to subjectivity-beyond-pain implies for Hegel a transition from particularity to universality. See Hilmer 1997, 195–96.

42. As the above discussion of *Antigone* shows, this is in fact not quite accurate: the heroine Antigone is capable of enduring a pain through which she ultimately develops a deeper dimension of subjectivity. However, as I tried to show, this capacity to undergo and endure inner division is a dimension that Antigone possesses over and above her heroism—it is not something that emerges from or is associated with her heroism itself. *Qua* heroine, she does not possess this capacity.

43. *Aesth.* 1823, 184.

44. Compare in this context the following passage from the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength. Lacking strength, Beauty hates the Understanding for asking of her what it cannot do. But the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. (*Phän.*, § 32)

45. See *VAI*, 141/*LAI*, 102.

46. Houlgate speaks of an 'essentially inward freedom that ultimately transcends and exceeds any determinate form of aesthetic experience' (Houlgate 1997, 13). This 'freedom does indeed transcend art in the sense that it finds its most perfect articulation beyond art in philosophy' (*ibid.*, 14).

47. See *ibid.*, 18. See also my discussion of this passage in chapter 6.

48. *Enz.*, § 563.

49. *Aesth.* 1826, 33.

50. See Jäschke 1982.

51. *Aesth.* 1826, 137.

52. See also *Aesth.* 1823, 186: 'Dies Leben in sich in einem Anderen aber ist das Verhältnis der Liebe'.

53. Hilmer 1997, 202.

## 6 Modern Beauty

We have seen in the preceding chapter that art can and does ‘emancipate’ itself from the aim of presenting the aesthetic human ideal in Hegel’s account. In light of the interpretation developed in previous chapters, this development can be seen as a (rational) reaction to the tension inherent in the aesthetic human ideal. Thus, one could also say that art makes progress by detaching itself from this ideal, as it thereby overcomes the inner tensions associated with it.

Does this mean that art abandons beauty altogether, or that it ought to abandon it? The present chapter is dedicated to the question of what becomes of beauty and beautiful art in modernity in Hegel’s view. A number of recent commentators on Hegel’s aesthetics have suggested that Hegel’s writings on late romantic art can be interpreted as rendering support for the thesis that art needs to emancipate itself from its dedication to being beautiful in modernity in order to maintain its legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> In fact, a number of compelling Hegelian readings of phenomena of post-Hegelian and modern art that have been put forward in recent years testify to the fact that this approach can be fruitful.<sup>2</sup> However, against this trend I suggest in the present chapter that from Hegel’s point of view there are nevertheless strong reasons for attempting to maintain a connection between art and beauty, even in modernity. At the same time, it will become apparent that attempts at explaining, within a Hegelian account, in what way art can continue to be beautiful in modernity are faced with formidable obstacles.

### BEAUTY IN MODERNITY

#### The End of Art and the End of Beauty

One of the most ardently debated topics in the contemporary discussion of Hegel’s aesthetics is certainly the question of what role art can and ought to play in modernity in Hegel’s view. In particular, the infamous slogan, the ‘end of art’, that has been attributed to Hegel has inspired a heated controversy. Dieter Henrich wrote an influential essay in the 1960s in which he advances a ‘pessimistic’ reading of Hegel’s position, according to which

Hegel holds that art becomes redundant in modernity and has to give way to philosophy.<sup>3</sup> Arthur Danto, in a series of essays, has been defending a somewhat more upbeat version of a similar view, according to which art in modernity gives way in particular to the philosophy of art in Hegel's view.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, in the recent decade or so, a trend towards a more 'optimistic' reading of Hegel's position can be observed. Annemarie Gethmann-Siebert, for instance, has argued in a series of publications that Hegel's thesis of the end of art should be taken to indicate that art in modernity loses its cultural status as the sole and primary norm-giving institution, but that this loss of status makes available a whole new terrain of artistic options, both formally and in terms of artistic subject matter.<sup>5</sup> Robert Pippin has defended a Hegelian theory of abstract painting, arguing that even though Hegel himself may not have been able to envisage it, abstract painting can be shown within a Hegelian account to be on a par with philosophy with regard to its capacity to articulate and give expression to a modern conception of freedom.<sup>6</sup> Stephen Houlgate has argued that art remains indispensable in modernity in Hegel's view, even though it has to be considered as subordinate to philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Most recently, Benjamin Rutter has put forward a detailed exploration of Hegel's account of the various modern arts, and in particular of the distinctive value that modern works of art can have in Hegel's view.<sup>8</sup>

Many commentators whose research manifests this more 'optimistic' trend believe that art can continue to play a significant role in modernity, in a Hegelian account, only if it emancipates itself from its traditional dedication to beauty. There is a tendency to explain this need for modern art to turn away from beauty with reference to Hegel's view that the cultural, historical and political conditions of modernity are radically different from those of Greek antiquity; for instance, the latter, in contrast to the former, are said to provide an environment congenial to the creation and admiration of beauty. Thus, these commentators argue that since the central value of modernity is human freedom, understood as autonomy and freedom from the authority of nature, a value such as beauty, which is grounded in the sensuous, natural manifestation of spiritual contents, can no longer appeal to the modern mind. Furthermore, modern political developments—again associated with the introduction of human individual freedom as a central value—are said to result in the emergence of a 'world of prose', a modern market society in which human individuals function as cogs in a machinery of labor, trade and financial transactions. Such individuals can no longer conceive of themselves, or be represented as, beautiful, self-sufficient embodiments of spirit. Rather, they are mere fragments, with spiritual meaning residing only in the whole of the society of which they are one functioning part.<sup>9</sup>

It is certainly correct that Hegel's conception of the modern political, historical and cultural conditions plays an important role in his assessment of the changing role of art in the modern world. However, I do not think that this assessment can be explained *solely* in terms of the external circumstances in which art is produced and received in modernity in Hegel's

account. The kind of explanation just cited argues that beauty or beautiful art is no longer adequate to the conditions of modernity for Hegel. However, within a Hegelian account it should be possible to explain why beauty or beautiful art is *inherently* flawed or problematic, and not just relative to the historical, cultural or political circumstances in which it is practiced. There are two reasons for demanding such an explanation.

The first is that one of Hegel's most important methodological tenets is that the only legitimate form of critique is immanent critique, that is, a critique that assesses the position to be criticized in light of its own standards.<sup>10</sup> If the only criticism of beauty or beautiful art that can be put forward is that it is not compatible with the values or standards of modernity, then this does not amount to an immanent critique of beauty or beautiful art. Rather, beauty or beautiful art would then merely be shown to fail if judged in light of the peculiar standards and values of modernity—which may, after all, not be the standards inherent in beauty or beautiful art itself.

The second reason is that Hegel—the mature Hegel, in any case—is a notoriously strict opponent of any form of nostalgia for the supposedly golden age of antiquity in contrast to modernity.<sup>11</sup> The notion that beauty or beautiful art were legitimate and adequate in antiquity but not in modernity might be taken to provide a reason for holding on to some form of such nostalgia. For even if modern political and cultural conditions are taken to be superior to the ones characteristic of antiquity, the fact that beauty was possible under the latter but is no longer possible under the former may be considered to be a reason for regret. It is only if beauty can be shown to be inherently flawed that such regret will turn out to be entirely misguided.

The interpretation of Hegel's conception of beauty developed in the previous chapters offers an account of the inherent flaws of classical Greek beauty, or of the aesthetic human ideal. Nevertheless, it would be too hasty to conclude from this immanent critique of classical beauty that art ultimately has to emancipate itself from beauty altogether in Hegel's view. In fact, this would be an unfortunate result. For as I shall argue below, from Hegel's point of view, art is in certain respects less likely to face a crisis of legitimacy in modernity if it can maintain its connection with beauty than if this connection is altogether severed. Furthermore, it is not clear whether Hegel believes that the classical conception of beauty discussed and criticized in the preceding chapters—a conception of beauty that is not only indigenous to the ancient Greek culture, but that is also an extremely ambitious one, revolving around an aesthetic human ideal with ethical and political connotations—is the only possible and correct one. In other words, it is not clear whether Hegel might not allow that alternative conceptions of beauty, over and above the Greek classical one, are possible and conceivable. If such alternative conceptions of beauty were conceivable within Hegel's account, there would be room for arguing that art may continue to be beautiful while at the same time 'emancipating' itself from Greek beauty. Consequently, art would be able to overcome the tension inherent in the

classical conception of beauty without thereby having to abandon its dedication to beauty altogether—art could continue to exist as beautiful art even in modernity. In the present chapter I shall explore this possibility by trying to assess to what extent Hegel's writings provide a basis for developing alternative conceptions of beauty over and above the Greek classical one.

### The Tension Inherent in Classical Beauty

Since the thesis that classically beautiful art suffers from an inherent flaw is central to the argument pursued in the following pages, it will be helpful to begin by recapitulating the essential components of the interpretation of Hegel's account of classical beauty developed in the preceding chapters. As we have seen, classically beautiful art stands in a relation of dependence and continuity to human nature in Hegel's view. It finds inspiration in human nature for how to make a spiritual content sensuously manifest. For in the natural human body, the inner spirit manifests itself and becomes sensuously perceptible. As Hegel writes in the *Encyclopedia*, '[a]mong such formations the human is the supreme and genuine formation, because only in it can the spirit have its bodiliness and thus an expression accessible to intuition'.<sup>12</sup> But classically beautiful art finds in human nature not merely a model for the sensuous manifestation of spirit, but, moreover, a model for a *unity* of spirit and sensuous natural form. The human figure as it is presented in classically beautiful art embodies a perfect unity of body and soul, an identity of inner and outer. For Hegel, this identity of inner and outer, or of spirit and natural sensuous form, constitutes the essence of the classically beautiful human figure, the aesthetic human ideal. Because the beautiful human figure constitutes a unity of sensuous form and spiritual content, it can also be considered as a sensuous sign in which the signified is not distinct from the sign itself; it is a self-signifying sign. I suggested in previous chapters that the notion of the self-signifying sign lies at the heart of Hegel's notion of beauty.

However, whereas art can find inspiration for the presentation of the aesthetic human ideal in the actual, living human individual, no such individual in fact embodies this ideal. Hence, in order to turn the human figure as it exists in nature into an embodiment of the aesthetic human ideal, the artist has to make alterations and corrections to it: he has to alter it in such a way that it becomes a perfect identity of inner and outer, of spirit and sensuous natural form. Living human individuals are always deficient with regard to their beauty, which therefore needs to be completed and brought to perfection in art. It is 'the business of art', Hegel writes, 'to expunge the difference between the spiritual and the purely natural, and to make the external bodily presence into a shape, beautiful through and through, developed, ensouled and spiritually living'.<sup>13</sup>

The artist who seeks inspiration in human nature in this way thus assumes a peculiar position between activity and passivity. He is, on the one hand, passive in the sense that he is inspired by nature; he resorts to the 'given



forms of nature and their meaning', as Hegel puts it.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, he does not merely imitate something that is given in nature. Rather, he has to use the living human being as a model, but also make corrections to it. In a passage in the *Aesthetics*, Hegel describes the ambiguous role of the artist who seeks inspiration in human nature in this way, as one who holds a middle position between active creation and passive imitation. Hegel here refers to this kind of artist as 'free artist':

The free artist is forming (*bildend*), the symbolic artist in-forming (*einbildend*). The content is ready, [the free artist] does not need to struggle for it. [. . .] The free artist is limited in himself; he has to be done with the technical aspect as well. He always takes as his subject matter a content which is in-and-for-itself, because it is an Ideal, which corresponds to the concept. The content is determined in-and-for-itself, and hence also the form (*Gestalt*). The arbitrariness (*Willkür*) of the artist is excluded, the content is therefore present (*vorhanden*) for the artist, he finds it (*findet ihn vor*), and the artist is only the subjective activity of re-presenting (*des Darstellens*); he is forming in general (*bildend überhaupt*). In this activity of forming, however, he also develops his subject further (*bildet er auch fort*), but imperceptibly, inconspicuously. He appears only to execute what is already there and complete for itself.<sup>15</sup>

What is remarkable about this passage is that Hegel here describes as 'free' the artist who is involved in the activity of re-presenting something that is given to him, or that he finds ready-made in front of him. Thus the artist asserts his freedom precisely not by devising artistic form and content autonomously, from scratch, as it were, but rather by limiting himself to a content that is already there, complete in itself. But this spiritual content has a special quality: it is such that insofar as *it* is determined, its sensuous form is determined as well. This content is the 'Ideal', which Hegel defines as 'the complete unification of the soul and the body', as we saw in chapter 2.<sup>16</sup> In the Ideal, form and content cannot be separated from each other. Hence, where the artist limits himself to this content, there is no need for him to struggle and search for a sensuous form in which to express or convey it—the form is already given with the content, and *vice versa*. The artist therefore becomes free in the sense that he now deals with an artistic subject matter that is inherently congenial to artistic treatment: a spiritual content that gives itself a sensuous form, and a sensuous form that implies a spiritual content. The artist who limits himself to this subject matter can thus rely on a kind of 'pre-established harmony' between his subject matter and his artistic intention, that is, his intention to make spiritual content sensuously perceptible. He is free in the sense that as artist, and in his artistic activity, he can feel at home in his subject matter.

However, in contrast to the claim that art 'imitates' the human shape as it has found it, Hegel makes it clear in the earlier quotation that the free



artist does not in fact merely imitate something that is ready and complete in itself. This is what he may appear to be doing, Hegel concedes: '[H]e appears only to execute what is already there and complete for itself'. But in reality, what he does is not merely to re-present, but to form, *bilden*, and more than that: the artist not only *bildet*, but also *bildet fort*, that is, he makes alterations and corrections to the human model as he finds it given in nature.

It is important to note the nature and status of these corrections that the artist makes to the actual human individual. They are not wild imaginings, as if the artist was to present speaking animals or flying humans. Rather, the artist here takes himself to merely develop further—*fortbilden*—and actualize an aesthetic potential that he finds present in the actual, living human being. As we have seen in chapter 1, the human being is the only living creature that possesses such aesthetic potential in Hegel's view—no other animals can achieve the same kind of unity of inner spirit and outer body. But because the corrections the artist makes to human nature are related to the living human individual as actualizations of its aesthetic potential, the beautiful human individual presented in art embodies something that actual human beings *could* be. And more than that, as we saw in chapter 3, the presentation of the beautiful Ideal in art in fact implies a normative claim. It implies a statement to the effect that human beings *ought* to fully actualize their aesthetic potential and purge themselves of everything that might stand in the way of this potential being actualized.

This ambition of the free artist not to soar without restraint beyond human nature, but to remain faithful to it and merely develop further its inherent aesthetic potential, subjects him to certain constraints. One might speak here of the inherent dialectic of the normative claims that beautiful art (implicitly) makes. Beautiful art makes a normative, prescriptive claim concerning what the human individual, ideally, ought to be, or which potential it ought to actualize. But since this is an ideal conception of the *human* being, it must not imply that anything that is essential to human existence or to the human spirit is missing in the individual who realizes this conception—if this was the case, the ideal conception would no longer be a human ideal, an ideal of the human individual. Hence precisely in making a prescriptive claim pertaining to human nature, beautiful art has to subject itself to the constraints inherent in human nature. Accordingly, the success of the free artist has to be measured not merely by whether he manages to present a unity of spiritual content and sensuous form, and hence a perfectly beautiful form, but also by whether this unity is viable as a human ideal, whether it does justice to all aspects of the human spirit.

But it is precisely this second standard with regard to which the free artist and the beautiful art he creates fail from Hegel's point of view. The human ideal presented in classically beautiful art is supposed to embody what actual human individuals ideally ought to be. However, in light of Hegel's normative, teleological conception of the human being as spiritual

creature, there is a crucial aspect of humanity that is absent from such perfect unities of spirit and natural body. This is the capacity that in Hegel's account is constitutive of subjectivity: the capacity to distance oneself from or oppose oneself to one's external, bodily manifestations. By definition, this capacity has to be absent from the beautiful figure, since classical beauty and its value is grounded in the undivided unity of soul and body, spirit and nature. Beautiful art therefore fails by its own standards. It purports to present figures that are both beautiful *and* human. However, in being beautiful, these figures fail to be fully human, or fail to actualize the human being's *telos*, to become a genuine subject or self. On the other hand, if they were closer to what human beings are really destined to be, they would fail to be beautiful.<sup>17</sup>

One might object at this point that it is not justified to speak of an *inherent* tension in the aesthetic human ideal here, rather than simply of an opposition between two values: beauty on the one hand, and something like spiritual value, subjectivity, on the other hand. Why should the aesthetic human ideal be considered inconsistent merely because it favors one value over the other? However, the decisive point is that the aesthetic human ideal implies both a vision of aesthetic perfection and a certain conception of *human* perfection. Hence, it implicitly aims at making a (correct) statement about what the human *telos* consists in *by presenting* an aesthetic ideal; it is committed to making such a statement because it represents a conception of beauty that stands in continuity with human nature. However, it is with regard to this statement that the aesthetic human ideal is in error.

At the same time, this tension implicit in classically beautiful art potentially makes a type of beauty conceivable that avoids the problematic implications of classical beauty. If the problematic feature of classical beauty is that it draws on and affirms a continuity between artistic beauty and human nature, then a less problematic type of artistic beauty might be one that explicitly abandons this continuity. Before considering whether there is room in Hegel for such a new, modern type of artistic beauty, we need to bring into fuller view the debate about the Hegelian thesis of the 'end of art', to see how the present discussion of beauty can shed light on it.

### Art in Modernity: Subordination, Adequacy and Indispensability

In an essay written in the 1960s, Henrich formulates what he takes to be the crucial challenge faced by art in modernity according to Hegel.<sup>18</sup> These formulations were very influential and still function as an important point of reference in many recent discussions of Hegel's views concerning the status of modern art.<sup>19</sup> The challenge, according to Henrich, is a twofold one. On the one hand, modernity for Hegel is the age of reflection: '[R]eflect-*edness* is the conditioning factor in our present consciousness and life'.<sup>20</sup> This means that in modernity, anything that is to be accepted as valid or authoritative—ethical, political and social norms as well as factual claims

about the structure of the world or the origin and nature of man—has to be supportable by rational argument. The discursive, conceptual medium of philosophy is therefore the primary medium of justification with regard to any content, factual or normative, in modernity. Furthermore, philosophical reflection, if carried out to completion, also yields a particular kind of insight into the metaphysical structure of the world according to Hegel: a ‘knowing of the fulfilled and fulfilling union of consciousness and actuality’, as Henrich puts it.<sup>21</sup> Art has to subordinate itself to the preeminence of the conceptual medium and of the fundamental insight it yields. This means, more specifically, that art must only present contents that are attuned with the overarching philosophical insight into the union of consciousness and actuality. Furthermore, art cannot by itself justify or give authority to the contents it presents. Rather, these contents first have to be justified reflectively, that is, philosophically. Only on the basis of such prior reflective insight can a content presented in art be accepted as valid. As Henrich puts it: works of art ‘presuppose a knowing deepened by reflection, a knowing of the fulfilled and fulfilling union of consciousness and actuality, and they move only within this union’.<sup>22</sup> The challenge arising for art in this situation is that it becomes subordinate to philosophy. Its task will be merely to illustrate the insights that are reached and, more importantly, justified elsewhere, in the reflective medium of philosophy. The activity of art will be merely ‘ancillary’ to that of philosophy, as Henrich formulates it.<sup>23</sup>

On the other hand, the second challenge facing art in modernity is that it may become inadequate to giving expression to relevant substantial contents, at least in their entirety. ‘The life relationships of modernity [. . .] have become abstract’,<sup>24</sup> Henrich writes, and art can at best convey parts of the complex epistemic, ethical and social structures that underlie modern life. These structures in their entirety escape artistic representation. Thus, the content of art becomes ‘partial’, according to Henrich, a part rather than the whole.<sup>25</sup>

Benjamin Rutter has argued that the challenge of redundancy constitutes a more serious threat for art than the challenge of partiality. After all, even if it is true that works of art cannot convey the foundations of modernity in their entirety, he states, it does not follow that they cannot adequately convey any part of them. It may not be necessary in order for art to flourish and remain significant that it be capable of addressing *all* of our central concerns.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, it would, in fact, seriously undermine the significance of art if it was only left to play the role of confirming and repeating what has already been established through philosophical discourse. However, Rutter does not accept Henrich’s challenge that art becomes redundant in modernity for Hegel. Henrich’s argument, Rutter states, seems to rely upon ‘an undialectical understanding of the relationship between meaning and embodiment’.<sup>27</sup> According to Henrich, the task of art in modernity is to give expression to precisely the same content as philosophy, only in artistic, sensuous form. However, Rutter argues, according to Hegel, form and content

cannot be separated from each other in this way, since they are dialectically intertwined. The same content, in other words, cannot simply be conveyed in different forms.<sup>28</sup> But if the notion that the task of art in modernity is simply to convey the 'same content' as philosophy has to be rejected, then it will not be possible to argue on these grounds that art becomes redundant.<sup>29</sup>

It seems to me that Rutter dismisses Henrich's argument too quickly at this point. As I understand Henrich, a problem arises for art in modernity from Hegel's point of view precisely because form and content are dialectically intertwined in the way Rutter urges. According to Henrich's argument, the only fully true content for Hegel is the content conveyed by a comprehensive philosophical system. But the medium that is congenial to this content is philosophical, conceptual thought. Accordingly, when attempts are made to convey this content in some other form, such as artistic representation, the problem arises that when represented in this way, the intended content is bound to be conveyed at best in part, and hence to be altered and distorted. Art must aim at the content of philosophy, and yet it must inevitably miss it, because this content can only be fully conveyed in the medium of conceptual thought. And so the challenge of redundancy and the challenge of inadequacy are in fact connected: not only is art under threat to become ancillary to philosophy, but it is also bound to remain only ever 'second best' when compared with philosophy, since the artistic medium can never represent philosophical content in fully adequate form.

One might attempt to rebut this challenge by showing how from Hegel's point of view art may turn out to remain adequate for the expression of substantial cultural, ethical or political contents after all. This strategy is being pursued by David James, for instance, who proposes to reconstruct Hegel's progressive history of art in a way that shows that throughout its history, art remains adequate for the expression of substantial, culturally significant contents for Hegel.<sup>30</sup> James states that in the ancient Greek world, on Hegel's account, art is considered the primary and most adequate means for the expression of substantial cultural contents. The standard reading of Hegel has it that art loses this status in the Christian, romantic world, and even more obviously in modernity. In contrast, James discusses various forms of art or 'aesthetic consciousness' that turn out to be adequate to capture some significant cultural content.

However, it is crucial to note at this point that even if the challenge of inadequacy may be rebutted, this will not be sufficient for allaying all Hegelian worries concerning the status of art in modernity. From Hegel's point of view, there is a general problem faced by all attempts to justify art in modernity in terms of its adequacy. To see why, we must remind ourselves of the relation between artistic form and content that Hegel takes to be characteristic of classically beautiful art. It would be wrong to describe this relation in terms of adequacy. In classical beauty, the natural, sensuous form in which the relevant spiritual content is being conveyed is not just adequate to the content, but a constitutive part of it—without being so conveyed,

the content could not be what it is, a unity of spirit and nature. As we saw above, the artistic representation of classical beauty continues and completes this *Einbildung* of spirit into nature that characterizes the classically beautiful figure. Thus we here have *unity* of form and content. The notion of adequacy, in contrast, suggests that whereas some form or medium may be adequate for the expression of a certain content, it is in any case not necessary for the content to be so expressed; the content may or may not be expressed in this particular form or medium, since it is already available in other form (in the present case, this would presumably be the form of philosophy). Thus even if we were able to ensure ourselves that art continues to be adequate for the expression of relevant spiritual contents, this would offer only little comfort in light of the fact that it is certainly no longer *indispensable* for this purpose. Even if adequacy were granted, indispensability could no longer be claimed—and this raises a problem of justification.<sup>31</sup> As adequate and yet dispensable, art could always only be a pale copy of its earlier self.

In order to fully allay Hegelian worries concerning the status of art in modernity, then, it will be necessary to show that art is not merely adequate, but indispensable—that it has some distinctive, unique contribution to make to the discourse of modernity. The most obvious way to show that art remains indispensable in modernity for Hegel is to argue that it remains dedicated to beauty, while beauty is conceived of as an aesthetic quality that is exclusive to art, or which at least cannot be reduced to the function of conveying a conceptual, philosophical content. However, in order to make this argument, one also has to show, furthermore, why beauty continues to matter in modernity, or at least to be compatible with its core values.

One author who pursues this approach is Stephen Houlgate. According to Houlgate, the central task of modern art for Hegel is to give aesthetic expression to concrete human freedom and life. But such expression ‘entails’ beauty, he states; hence modern art, insofar as it fulfills its central task, remains beautiful art. In explaining more concretely what it means for art to give aesthetic expression to secular, human freedom, Houlgate draws on Hegel’s account of Dutch art, in particular Dutch genre painting and still life. In genre painting, the artist depicts everyday scenes, ordinary people involved in mundane activities such as threading a needle or smoking a pipe, but ‘breathe[s] life and “soul” into the objects portrayed’, thereby ‘[continuing] to give sensuous expression to the “Idea”’.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in still life, the painter portrays insignificant, mundane and often lifeless objects, but imbues them with life in his portrait. In this way, such paintings afford the viewer the satisfaction of feeling at home in the everyday scenes and mundane objects depicted in them. They give expression to *concrete* freedom and life, because freedom and life is shown in them as embodied in concrete scenes and objects taken from everyday human life.

Houlgate acknowledges, however, that his approach faces a problem. Hegel seems to think, Houlgate states, that there is an aspect of modern

freedom that eludes aesthetic expression: since such freedom is inward or subjective, its most congenial realm is pure, philosophical thought. It is 'an essentially inward freedom that ultimately transcends and exceeds any determinate form of aesthetic expression'.<sup>33</sup> One might thus say that in Houlgate's view, the aesthetic expression of human freedom is always to a certain extent inadequate. The most adequate expression of freedom, in contrast, is to be found in philosophy. Nevertheless, Houlgate insists that the aesthetic expression of freedom remains indispensable even in modernity for Hegel. The reason is that 'as well as being thinking beings, we are sensuous, imaginative beings who require a sensuous or imaginative vision, not just a conceptual understanding, of what it is to be truly free and human'.<sup>34</sup> Because human beings are essentially sensuous and imaginative as well as rational, they continue to need art for the aesthetic expression of freedom as the central modern value, even though such expression is to a certain extent inadequate. Hence Houlgate ultimately defends the indispensability of (beautiful) art in modernity with reference to a psychological necessity: given our peculiar kind of cognitive set up, we continue to need art and beauty even in modernity.

Another author who has argued that at least one important task for art in modernity is to exhibit beauty in Hegel's view is Annemarie Gethmann-Siefert.<sup>35</sup> While adamant that Hegel is not a 'classicist' who believes that all art should be measured by the standard of whether it exhibits classical beauty, she nevertheless holds that artistic beauty remains important in modernity for Hegel. Classical beauty, she argues, is characterized by the fact that it combines formal perfection with the communication of substantial cultural contents. Thus in classical Greece, a beautiful artwork would not only afford its spectator aesthetic pleasure, but it would at the same time have a guiding and orienting function, conveying to him the central ethical values of his community and inviting him to accept them. In contrast, in modernity, beauty is exhibited precisely by those artworks that renounce substantial cultural contents, and instead restrict themselves to playful and trivial subject matters. A primary example of such an artwork, according to Gethmann-Siefert, is modern opera: while formally perfect—since it unites music, theatre, painting and dance in one *Gesamtkunstwerk*—it deliberately abstains from addressing anything but insignificant contents such as fantastic stories or fairy tales. It therefore affords its spectator aesthetic pleasure while demanding he abstract from the content of the work he enjoys. Such formally beautiful artworks with trivial content are complemented, on the other hand, by works that renounce beauty but dedicate themselves to culturally substantial contents: Schiller's dramas are Gethmann-Siefert's prime example for such works. Thus Gethmann-Siefert holds that art in modernity cannot be both beautiful *and* exhibit the most relevant and substantial contents for Hegel—beauty and ethical life 'break apart' in modernity, which becomes particularly obvious in modern opera. The obvious question at this point is what significance a purely formal type of beauty might have.

Gethmann-Siefert is unfortunately not entirely clear on this point. Her main argument seems to be, however, that formally beautiful works of art ultimately have an educational function: they teach citizens of a modern state to enjoy aesthetic pleasure while abstracting from, or in fact being critical of, the contents in light of which they experience such pleasure, thereby enabling them to develop in general a more critical, less 'affirmative' attitude towards any allegedly authoritative contents.<sup>36</sup> Thus Gethmann-Siefert holds that exhibiting beauty is at least one of the distinctive tasks of art even in modernity for Hegel, and that it is in part in virtue of its beauty, at least, that modern art remains indispensable. For in virtue of its (formal) beauty, modern art can fulfill an educational function.

Both Houlgate and Gethmann-Siefert acknowledge the necessity of providing some argument for why and how beauty can continue to matter or to be of value in modernity from Hegel's point of view. For Gethmann-Siefert, beauty is justified in modernity because it fulfills an educational function. For Houlgate, beauty is justified in modernity because it is and remains a psychological necessity for us human beings to perceive the truth in sensuous, intuitable form—even though this form of presentation amounts to a certain distortion of the truth. In light of our preceding discussion of classical beauty and its inherent flaw, we can now bring into view another way of justifying the persistence of artistic beauty in modernity from Hegel's point of view. Artistic beauty may be justified as sufficiently modern if it consists in a type of beauty that has overcome the inherent flaws of classical beauty. In fact, the preceding discussion of classical beauty suggests that, from Hegel's point of view, the persistence of beauty in modernity can *only* be sufficiently justified if the kind of beauty exhibited by modern works of art is not of the classical kind, and therefore free from the tension inherent in the latter.<sup>37</sup>

## A MODERN FORM OF BEAUTY?

### The Beauty of '*Schein*'

One of the most striking characteristics of classical beauty as Hegel conceives of it is that such beauty both presupposes and affirms a continuity between the artwork on the one hand, and human nature on the other. As we saw above, this became particularly clear in light of the role played by the artist in the creation of classical beauty. The artist who seeks to create classical beauty is to a certain extent passive; he finds his inspiration in nature, more specifically in the human individual, whose aesthetic potential he actualizes by presenting perfectly beautiful human individuals. These beautiful figures, on the other hand, implicitly make a normative claim pertaining to living human individuals. They present a human ideal, a conception of what human beings ideally ought to be like. Hence, the continuity



between the classically beautiful work of art and the actual human being consists in the fact that the former on the one hand takes the latter as a model of inspiration, and on the other hand purports to function as a normative model for it.

This continuity between the beautiful artwork and human nature has a number of important implications. Most obviously, the subject matter available to the artist to be represented in his work is limited. Insofar as the work is to be beautiful, it has to present the human figure.<sup>38</sup> More generally, classically beautiful art is a type of art in which the subject matter constitutes the preeminent component of the artwork. The subject matter of the classically beautiful work is the aesthetic human ideal. But the aesthetic human ideal is characterized by the fact that in it, spiritual content and sensuous, natural form are already perfectly unified. Hence the artist, in representing this content, does not need to struggle in order to create from scratch an artistic form to match the content he wishes to express. Rather, the artistic form he needs to create follows directly from the content. It is precisely this freedom from having to struggle for artistic form that Hegel has in mind when he calls the classical artist a 'free' artist, as we have seen above. The price the artist has to pay for this freedom, on the other hand, is that his own creative accomplishment has to remain relatively inconspicuous—the artist steps back behind his subject matter, which takes care of itself, as it were, and determines its own aesthetic form.

Another striking characteristic of classically beautiful art is that it escapes a characterization of art in terms of semblance or illusionary appearance. The aim of the classically beautiful work is not to create an illusion, to present something that appears to be real and yet is not there in reality. To be sure, the ideally beautiful human figures presented in classically beautiful art are not to be found in nature. However, the aim of classically beautiful art is not to create a gap between art and reality, but on the contrary, to minimize this gap, by drawing on and affirming the continuity between art and human nature. As we shall see below, one of the most important developments that Hegel observes in post-classical, more specifically in late romantic art, is that this continuity between human nature and art begins to be abandoned.

I suggested in chapter 5 that in the romantic period, art begins to distance itself from classical beauty for Hegel in the sense that it begins to address subjects that are explicitly excluded from classically beautiful art. More specifically, romantic art begins to concern itself with the pain and inner division that are necessarily absent from the perfect unity of soul and body that is constitutive of the aesthetic human ideal. This is true in particular for romantic Christian art in Hegel's account. However, Hegel distinguishes between a religious and a secular strand in romantic art, with the latter one occurring chronologically later than the former. The phase of Christian romantic art is followed on Hegel's account by a period in which art revolves around themes from the sphere of medieval chivalry,



such as chivalric virtues, or chivalric love and adventures. But the most radical change in the status and structure of art occurs in late romantic art in Hegel's view. He finds some of the most obvious examples for this change in Dutch painting of the seventeenth century, and more generally in still life and genre painting.

What is striking about Dutch still life and genre painting is that it abandons the emphasis on substantial subject matter that, on Hegel's account, is characteristic in particular of classically beautiful art, but also, to a certain extent, of religious romantic art. The human aesthetic ideal is a substantial subject matter, on the one hand, in the sense that it embodies a normative model of what human beings ideally ought to be like. On the other hand, it is also substantial in the sense that it is inherently aesthetic or congenial to artistic presentation: in it, spiritual content and aesthetic form are inextricably connected with each other. Still life and genre painting, in contrast, address subject matters that are not only trivial, mundane or prosaic—and may in fact even be ethically questionable—but that furthermore lack any inherent aesthetic potential. Unlike the aesthetic human ideal, the objects and scenes depicted in Dutch paintings are in themselves decidedly non-beautiful; the only chance for them to ever become aesthetically appealing is through artistic representation. This expansion of subject matter implies a radical change in the structure and status of art for Hegel. This is reflected in the fact that it provokes him to raise the question of whether works that depict the prose of daily life even deserve to be called works of art:

Here the difficulty arises of stating what works of art are; whether one can call such works works of art, where such [prosaic] subject matters are treated with masterly skill. If daily life in its prosaicness is addressed, in the form of art: are these works works of art? In the ordinary sense, this is the imitation of nature. The content may consist in bad, unethical subject matters, which are endowed with the form of beauty through art. One has to say that they are works of art, because in the abstract, general sense, all kinds of things can be called this way. But if one speaks of art in the philosophical sense, one has to require content, subject matter, and inner idea, and furthermore one has to require that the content is truthful and substantial in and for itself.<sup>39</sup>

When considered from a philosophical point of view (that is, within his own philosophical account), Hegel states, works of art have to have a substantial content. From this point of view, then, it would be wrong to call the late romantic works that represent prosaic subject matters by the name of artworks. On the other hand, in the discussion following the statement just quoted, Hegel reaches conclusions that may be taken to belie his claim that such works cannot, strictly speaking, be called works of art.

After all, Hegel observes, the focus on prosaic, unaesthetic subject matters in Dutch painting has a point, or it creates a certain effect. The spectator who is confronted with such a work takes no interest in its subject matter—he can take no interest in it, because its subject matter is in fact not interesting.<sup>40</sup> However, this is why his attention is drawn to something else: to the way the subject matter is represented in the artwork, and more generally to the fact *that* it is represented in the artwork. In particular, in the case of Dutch still life, we are struck by the masterly skill with which the artist is able to create the illusory appearance of three-dimensional objects such as glasses, flowers or grapes on a two-dimensional canvas. He creates this illusion in particular by the use of color. The skillful painter is capable of combining colors on the canvas in certain ways that, when seen from up close, may look like an unordered muddle, but when perceived from the right distance, interact in such a way as to form impressions of shimmering silk, sparkling glasses, gold or jewelry, delicate lacing or soft fur.<sup>41</sup> Hegel describes what the artist thereby creates with reference to the term *Schein*, and states that in general in this form of art *Schein* plays a crucial role. The ambiguity of the term—both ‘shine’ and ‘illusion’—is certainly important here. The artist, on the one hand, creates the illusion of the presence of three-dimensional objects on a flat canvas. But he also brings about shine in the sense of gloss or luster, by creating an interplay of colors with shimmering, sparkling effects. Such shine has an almost musical quality, Hegel states: ‘This is as it were an objective music, a peal in colour’.<sup>42</sup> Thus shine, in contrast to illusion, means a more abstract quality, which does not necessarily evoke the illusory presence of some concrete object. What is important to *Schein* in the sense of both shine and illusion, in any case, is that it is created by the artist, and perceived as having been created by him. Hence the image on the canvas is not like a Fata Morgana in the desert, just as the sparkle on a painted glass is not like the sparkle on a real glass. Rather, both of them have been intentionally created by the artist, and what we admire in them is the skill with which they have been created. When looking at such works, one cannot but admire the skill and the talent of the artist.<sup>43</sup> Hence in such works of art, Hegel states, ‘the artist’s subjective skill and his application of the means of artistic production are raised to the status of an objective matter in works of art’.<sup>44</sup>

Thus where art exhibits *Schein*, its emphasis lies on the fact that it is something made or created by an artist. In other words, the artificiality of the work of art gains central importance here. One might therefore say that from Hegel’s point of view, this is the first time that art asserts its ability to make or create something on its own, or to posit something over and against reality. In classically beautiful art, the subjective activity of the artist is concealed behind the unity of artistic form and content that is readily given with the subject matter. Moreover, this subject matter—or at least the inspiration for it—is found in reality, in human nature. In contrast, in the late romantic period, art for the first time begins to emphasize its capacity

to create something out of itself, without guidance from nature—in short, to create *Schein*. Hence the continuity between art and nature, which used to be central to classically beautiful art, is now abandoned—the gap between art and reality, or art and nature, is openly emphasized.<sup>45</sup>

For Hegel, the artistic activity of producing *Schein* can itself become a content of art. Where the emphasis of an artwork is on *Schein*, its aim is not to convey or express some particular content—its content is insignificant—but rather to draw the spectator's attention to the very process of artistic creation, to the skill of the artist in creating *Schein* (in the twofold sense indicated above). One might thus say that here the content of the artwork is artistic creation itself. But one enters a circle here: artistic creation, in such works, is not aimed at conveying some substantial content, but rather at conveying itself. Hence the aim of artistic creation is to manifest itself *as* artistic creation that aims at manifesting itself. The artwork becomes fully self-referential—its content is just itself. Another way of making the same point is to say that the artwork is a sign that does not signify some other content, but signifies itself as sign.

In this way, we have at this point returned to the notion of the self-signifying sign via a discussion of Hegel's account of late romantic art, in particular of Dutch painting. This notion stood at the heart of the conception of classical beauty developed in the preceding chapters. Before this background, we can thus raise the question of whether the present conception of the self-signifying sign provides a sufficient basis for a Hegelian conception of late romantic beauty, or in other words, of a distinctively modern form of beauty. To begin with, there is some *prima facie* textual evidence that Hegel associates the late romantic art that is dedicated to *Schein* with a particular kind of beauty. He writes that in such works of art '[t]he aspect of *Schein* in beauty is being emphasized'.<sup>46</sup> The notion of the self-signifying sign proves helpful in this context in order to explain in more detail what the beauty of *Schein* might consist in from Hegel's point of view. Artworks that exhibit *Schein* are in a certain sense self-sufficient. It is true that they represent something (that is, some insignificant, prosaic subject matter), but they seek not to draw their spectator's attention to what they represent, but to the act of representing itself. In this sense, what they give expression to is not something that lies beyond the surface of the artwork itself; rather, it is immediately present in it. The work of art presents itself, its meaning is immediately intuitable in it. Thus, similar to the unity of inner and outer embodied by the beautiful human individual, the artwork that exhibits *Schein* presents a kind of immanent meaningfulness. That is to say, such a work conveys a meaning without thereby pointing beyond itself, in contrast to the symbol. We saw in the preceding chapters that symbolic signification always operates under the precondition of a partial difference between the symbol and its meaning for Hegel. This difference is overcome where we are confronted with self-signifying signs. We may therefore speculate at this point that from Hegel's point of view, artworks that exhibit *Schein* afford

their spectators a feeling of satisfaction that is in some respects similar to the feeling of reconciliation afforded by the intuition of the unity of spirit and nature embodied by the aesthetic human ideal. We can feel satisfied when we perceive the *Schein* of a work of art, because here we experience something like immanent, self-sufficient meaningfulness.

However, this parallel with the aesthetic human ideal does not carry very far. From Hegel's point of view, the fundamental shortcoming of the beauty of *Schein* is that it is essentially subjective.<sup>47</sup> What this means becomes clear when we contrast it with the unity of spirit and nature that is embodied in the aesthetic human ideal. As we have seen in detail in chapter 1, to say that spirit and nature enter into a unity here means that they join each other as complementary forces in one overall movement, such as the acquisition of habit. This movement essentially comprises both elements, a spiritual and a natural, or an inner and an outer. One can therefore say that here, a spiritual content is necessarily embodied or manifest in natural, external form; being so embodied is essential to it, in contrast to a purely inner mental state such as an emotion, which may or may not be expressed in bodily, natural form. This is why an artist who represents such a spiritual content in sensuous, intuitable form is in fact thereby merely continuing or completing a movement that is inherent to the content itself. In other words, there is a correspondence and harmony between subject matter and artistic representation where art gives expression to the aesthetic human ideal. In the sense that it relies on and implies such a correspondence between subject matter and artistic representation, we can say that classical beauty is objective. In contrast, where works of art exhibit the beauty of *Schein*, they take as their subject matter random, insignificant, mundane contents. There is nothing in these contents that demands to be artistically represented in the way in which spirit demands to be complemented by and embodied in sensuous natural form in the aesthetic human ideal. In this sense, the representation of such mundane contents and the creation of artistic *Schein* in general is a subjective affair on Hegel's account. It is brought about by the artist, but it is not grounded in his subject matter. Hence, at this stage, art is no longer essentially wedded to one particular subject matter from which it receives inspiration and whose inherent aesthetic potential it fulfills. Rather, it has become what Hegel calls a 'free, subjective skill, which is indifferent with regard to its subject matter', or an 'abstract skill, unconstrained with regard to its subject matter'.<sup>48</sup>

In light of our preceding discussion, the fact that it is subjective in this sense may on the one hand be considered as a strength in the beauty of *Schein*. For this subjectivity means that it abandons the continuity between art and human nature on which classical beauty rests and which it seeks to affirm. In abandoning this continuity, art is in a position to overcome the tensions associated with the classical paradigm. The subjective beauty of *Schein* does not suffer from the same flaws as classical beauty as it abstains from making any implicit normative claims pertaining to the human individual;

it neither draws on nor seeks to affirm a continuity between art and human nature. Instead, this is a type of beauty that is explicitly exclusive to art. Thus the beauty of *Schein* is, on the one hand, a less ambitious and less significant form of artistic beauty than classical beauty: in exhibiting the beauty of *Schein*, art no longer potentially provides normative guidance for us humans, it no longer seeks to show us what we ought to be like and how we ought to act.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, it is precisely this greater modesty of the beauty of *Schein* that enables it to overcome the inherent flaw of classical beauty. From Hegel's point of view, this emergence of a more coherent form of beauty may be considered as a rational reaction to the tensions associated with the aesthetic human ideal. In embracing the beauty of *Schein*, art can be consistent *and* beautiful at the same time.

Nevertheless, it is hard to see from Hegel's point of view why and how the beauty of *Schein* should matter to us, or why and how it should be of value to us. For Hegel, the objectivity of classical beauty is closely related to the fact that it is of value to us. Classical beauty is objective in the sense that it presents a unity of spirit and nature, and thus conveys a spiritual content that is essentially embodied in sensuous natural form, or that demands to be so embodied. But as we saw in chapter 3, the value of classical beauty is grounded precisely in the fact that it presents us with a unity of spirit and nature, such that in it we can see spirit as embodied, that is, as immediately present in sensuous natural form. From the point of view of us human beings as spiritual creatures, this means that in the face of such an embodied unity of spirit and nature, we can see our own spiritual nature immediately present in the other we are confronted with; we can therefore 'feel at home' in the other. Given the subjectivity of the beauty of *Schein*—that is, given the fact that it is not grounded in an inherent affinity of spiritual content or subject matter and sensuous representation—it is not clear how from Hegel's point of view its value may be explained. In fact, it is precisely in light of the subjectivity of works of art that exhibit *Schein* that Hegel makes his most skeptical remarks about such works; as we have seen, this is the point where he even feels compelled to raise the question of whether such works can still be legitimately called works of art.<sup>50</sup> If anywhere in Hegel's *Aesthetics*, here the thesis that art is coming to an end seems to be within immediate reach.

### Beauty and Abstract Art

One may wonder at this point whether the subjectivity of the beauty of *Schein* could somehow be overcome. One line of thought that may suggest itself here would be the following. If the subjectivity of *Schein* consists in the fact that artworks exhibiting it present a subject matter that is indifferent to being artistically represented or not, then perhaps subjectivity may be overcome where works of art cease to present any subject matter at all—where they become abstract, in other words.

In fact, it is possible to interpret the tendency of art to move away from substantial contents that Hegel takes to be manifest in Dutch painting (and in certain strands of late romantic art more generally), as a tendency towards greater abstraction. That art begins to concern itself with trivial, insignificant and inherently unaesthetic contents indicates that its emphasis shifts from *what* is artistically presented to *how* and *that* it is so presented. From this point of view, it may be seen as a natural continuation of the same tendency when art finally becomes abstract by abandoning altogether the presentation of concrete, actual contents. Hence, whereas Hegel himself did certainly not clearly envisage the possibility of abstract art, it is possible to read his discussion of *Schein* in the context of Dutch painting as an anticipation of its possibility. This line of thought may also be supported by returning to the notion of the self-signifying sign as applied to artworks that exhibit the beauty of *Schein*. One might say that the most perfect manifestation of a self-signifying sign as it is present in *Schein* is the abstract work of art. The abstract work of art represents or makes reference to no concrete, actual object. Yet it has a sensuous presence: it exhibits colors, form, a surface, light effects; in short, it exhibits *Schein* in the sense of shine. Moreover, this sensuous presence has been intentionally created by an artist, and is therefore not something natural or given, but something 'made'. Since the abstract work of art conveys no concrete content, in exhibiting *Schein*, it manifests nothing but the intentionally created sensuous presence of itself; it is a self-signifying sign.

Since it revolves around the notion of the self-signifying sign, this Hegelian interpretation of abstraction in art can escape a criticism that has been launched against abstraction from a Hegelian point of view by Stephen Houlgate. As mentioned earlier, according to Houlgate, the essential task of both traditional and modern art for Hegel is to give expression in sensuous form to concrete, embodied human freedom. It is in virtue of giving expression to human freedom in this way that art is beautiful. According to Houlgate, art abandons this dedication to beauty and the concrete expression of freedom once it turns abstract. Instead, abstract art would have been considered as a form of symbolic art by Hegel, and hence as regressive rather than progressive:

[O]ne should remember that many of the modern movements which are today regarded as revolutionary and progressive, would themselves have seemed reactionary to Hegel, to the extent that they have abandoned the presentation of concrete human freedom and resorted to styles that seem to be thoroughly *symbolic* rather than modern. The savage distortion of the human form by Picasso or DeKooning, the flattening and geometricizing of human form by Léger, the deliberate evocation of mystery by De Chirico, and the abstract, sublime transcendentalism of Rothko, all echo styles of art which Hegel associates with ancient symbolic cultures and so would have seemed to him to

be backward-looking, rather than modern—offering a reduced, insufficiently determinate or, indeed, wholly abstract conception of human spirituality, rather than a concrete modern one.<sup>51</sup>

What Houlgate means by the presentation of concrete human freedom is the presentation of embodied, lived human freedom—‘freedom and life incarnate’, as he also calls it.<sup>52</sup> For Houlgate, art must remain faithful to the human figure if it is to remain concrete and, indeed, beautiful. Where it abandons the human figure as a medium for the expression of freedom, it becomes symbolic. I agree with Houlgate that the living human figure, and in particular the beautiful human figure, constitutes for Hegel the very opposite of the symbol. As we have seen in chapter 1, for Hegel the symbol is a sign whose meaning is different from and therefore external to it. The beautiful human figure, in contrast, in which inner and outer or spirit and nature are perfectly unified, is a self-signifying sign; in it, the sign and what it signifies are not distinct. In this sense, one can say that art is essentially non-symbolic to the extent that it revolves around the beautiful human figure. However, precisely in light of this fact, abstract art does not have to be considered to be symbolic. On the contrary, we just saw that the fully abstract work of art may be considered as a self-signifying sign, in some respects parallel to the beautiful human figure. The self-signifying sign, however, as a sign whose meaning is not distinct from itself, is for Hegel precisely the opposite of a symbol. We can therefore resist Houlgate’s claim that abstraction in art must be considered as regressive from Hegel’s point of view, and therefore as having no legitimacy in modernity.<sup>53</sup>

But even if it is conceded that from Hegel’s point of view an abstract work of art is the most perfect exemplar of a self-signifying sign that exhibits *Schein*—and thus the most perfect embodiment of the beauty of *Schein*—the problem of subjectivity remains. As we have seen, for Hegel Dutch painting is subjective in the sense that it lacks the correspondence between subject matter and artistic representation that is characteristic of classically beautiful art. This shortcoming cannot be remedied by stripping the artwork of representational content altogether. In fact, if anything, this would seem to heighten its subjectivity even further, as the artist, if choosing not to represent anything at all, is left even more ‘unconstrained’ by his subject matter than when representing a mundane or insignificant theme or object.<sup>54</sup>

Rutter tries to avert the challenge of subjectivity that may be raised against abstract art from Hegel’s point of view by referring to a passage in the *Aesthetics* in which Hegel writes that in late romantic art, painterly skill is elevated to ‘an objective matter’.<sup>55</sup> However, on the most straightforward reading of this passage, Hegel merely states that in late romantic art painterly skill begins to assume the place of what formerly used to be occupied by truly objective contents, thus implying that this amounts to a kind of illegitimate subreption. On the other hand, there is a more substantial idea underlying Rutter’s Hegelian interpretation of abstraction,



according to which the central function of abstract art, in continuity with Dutch painting, is to teach us a Kantian lesson about visual perception. According to this reading, abstract art shows us that ‘vision is a *result*, the active achievement of the mind. What appears a single color at a distance is, on closer inspection, a variety of flecks, a Kantian “manifold”, and the painter’s “magic of appearance” is none other than the mind’s spontaneity’.<sup>56</sup> Rutter’s suggestion here appears to be very close to the Hegelian interpretation of abstract art that has been offered (and developed in greater detail) by Pippin.<sup>57</sup> Pippin’s ultimate aim in this context is to show that, contrary to Hegel’s own explicit statements, it is possible for art in modernity to convey or express substantial cultural contents. In particular, abstract painting can be seen as giving expression to the core value or concept of modernity, namely freedom understood as autonomy and liberation from the authority of nature. Abstract painting can therefore lay claim to being culturally significant in just the way which Hegel apparently wants to reserve for traditional, in particular ancient Greek, art. Pippin’s suggestion relies on a contrast between traditional representational painting on the one hand and abstract painting on the other. Traditional paintings create the illusion that we can see straight through them to the object—the image makes the object immediately present. Pippin suggests that from Hegel’s point of view, the problem with this is not so much that the painting thereby creates a sensory illusion, but rather that it suggests a false conception of the relation between image and object.<sup>58</sup> Traditional painting suggests that not just painterly images, but the images that constitute sensuous perception in general, are immediately and passively ‘read off’ from their objects. In fact, however, the images that constitute our visual experience, just like painterly images, are the result of a synthesizing activity, through which atomic constituents of visual meaning, such as dots, lines and colors, are united within an intelligible whole. This is the great lesson Hegel learned from Kant. Abstract painting reveals how sensuous meaning, both in painting and in visual experience, is constituted: it draws attention to the atomic components of an image and to the fact that they only make up a meaningful whole if they are being actively synthesized. This process of synthesis, in turn, follows certain rules or norms that are collectively constituted and potentially subject to historical change—rules that are relative to a certain community, in other words. The crucial point is that in the active constitution of sensuous meaning, subjects manifest their freedom, rather than, as according to the picture suggested by traditional representational painting, immediately receiving sensuous meaning from the object in a passive way. This active, free creation of the sensuous image—both of the painting and of visual experience in general—is revealed in abstract painting.<sup>59</sup>

If abstract painting is understood along these lines as conveying a meta-physical and epistemological insight into the mind’s relation to the world, it would certainly seem less compelling to raise a charge of subjectivity against it. On this reading, abstract art could in any case claim to be as objective



as the Kantian and post-Kantian philosophical theories that express similar views about the active, spontaneous character of sensuous perception. One may wonder, however, whether this result would not be achieved at the price of coming close again to assigning art a position in which it is merely 'ancillary' to philosophy. If the value and significance of art was to lie in the fact that it can make the same substantial and true statements as philosophy, only in a different form, it might begin to appear redundant.<sup>60</sup> In any case, it could then no longer claim to be indispensable; at best, it could claim to be adequate. In this scenario, the relevant content would already be fully articulated in the medium of philosophy, and the best art could hope for would be to be able to rise to the challenge of capturing this content in its entirety. In contrast, as suggested above, it would at least be desirable to be able to justify art in terms of its indispensability, not just its adequacy.

As discussed above, one way of insisting on the indispensability of art is to emphasize its connection with beauty. If the main purpose of abstract painting—or of late romantic and modern art more generally—consisted in exhibiting the beauty of *Schein*, the danger that art may be made redundant by philosophy could be averted. Moreover, art could thereby escape the criticisms that may be raised against the more substantial, classical form of beauty. In this way, the persistence of art in modernity could be fully justified: due to its connection with beauty, art would maintain its indispensability; at the same time, because the form of beauty in question is the beauty of *Schein*, it would not face the same objections as classically beautiful art does in Hegel's account.

However, as attractive as this solution may appear, we have seen that it faces a serious objection: it is not clear what can be said from Hegel's point of view to explain why and in what sense the beauty of *Schein* should be significant and of value to us. The dialectical situation we are faced with here is close to a dilemma. If we reject the beauty of *Schein* as a legitimate artistic paradigm due to its subjectivity, we are left without any obvious resources for explaining how art can continue to be considered indispensable in modernity. The Hegelian conception of the beauty of *Schein* developed above, on the other hand, would seem to provide such a resource; however, at the same time, it is not clear that this conception provides a sufficient basis for explaining the significance and value of an art dedicated to the beauty of *Schein*.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of the present chapter was to offer some reflections on the consequences we should draw from the preceding chapters regarding the nature and status of art in modernity. At the same time, I have tried to stay clear of arguing for any ultimate conclusions, instead exploring different argumentative routes that suggest themselves from Hegel's point of view, highlighting the advantages and disadvantages of each. The result may appear somewhat unsatisfactory, as none of the positions discussed above are such

that Hegel—given the evidence we have of his position from the *Aesthetics* anyway—could have wholeheartedly endorsed them. Hegel could not, and did not, wholeheartedly recommend that art emancipate itself from beauty altogether in modernity, for reasons indicated above. At the same time, no clear account of how art could continue to be beautiful in modernity emerges from Hegel’s writings—no clear account, that is, of what kind of modern beauty one might envisage from his point of view. Thus we seem to be left with having to waver between the alternative positions, neither one offering an ultimately satisfactory resting point. However, in light of the argument pursued in the book, we can now at least give a clear account of why and how we ended up in this uncomfortable dialectical situation. Abandoning beauty is not something that art can do casually or lightheartedly—where it does so, it is bound to invite questions about its legitimacy. At the same time, the fact that classical beauty—the aesthetic human ideal—suffers from an inherent flaw makes it untenable as an artistic paradigm; and it is not clear that there are viable alternative, non-classical forms of artistic beauty in sight that could conceivably take its place. So even though we find ourselves in a quandary, we know at least that there is no way back: we cannot ever return to classical beauty. This is the main conclusion I hope this book has succeeded in establishing.

## NOTES

1. See for instance Pippin 2008, Rutter 2010.
2. See Pippin 2008, Rutter 2010, Gethmann-Siefert 1992.
3. Henrich 1966.
4. Danto 1986a, Danto 1986b, Danto 1998.
5. See for instance ‘*Einleitung*’ in *Aesth.* 1826; Gethmann-Siefert 1992.
6. Pippin 2005. I discuss Pippin’s theory in more detail below.
7. Houlgate 1997.
8. Rutter 2010.
9. See Pippin 2008, Rutter 2010. Houlgate, in contrast, insists that art ought to continue to be beautiful in modernity in Hegel’s view (see Houlgate 1997).
10. See the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in particular Phän., §§ 84–85, for a famous formulation of this tenet.
11. See Henrich 1985, 205–206.
12. *Enz.*, § 558.
13. *VAII*, 21–22/*LAI*, 433–34. See also *VAI*, 199–202/*LAI*, 150–52; *VAI*, 204–206/*LAI*, 154–56; *VAI*, 217–20/*LAI*, 164–66; *Aesth.* 1826, 38–39.
14. *Enz.*, § 558.
15. *Aesth.* 1823, 154–55. A striking description of the artist’s ambivalent stance between imitation and creation can also be found in the following passage:

Es ist Sache einer tiefen Einsicht, die Notwendigkeit zu erkennen, daß das Geistige, sofern es existiert, diese Gestalt und nur diese haben muß, Lebendigkeit und menschliche Gestalt. Man kann auf allerhand Weisen der Erscheinung kommen, aber wenn es wahrhaftig erkannt werden soll, so muß es dem Begriff nach eingesehen werden, daß die äußerliche

Erscheinung, Existenz des Geistigen nur die menschliche Gestalt sein kann. Es ist nicht ein Nachgemachtes, freilich nachgeahmt, aber eben weil hier diese Natürlichkeit des Wahrhaften an und für sich ist. (Aesth. 1826, 123)

The human figure is *nachgeahmt*, but not *nachgemacht* in art, Hegel writes—the meaning of the two terms is hardly distinguishable, which brings out well the ambiguity that Hegel is after here.

16. Aesth. 1826A, 145.
17. I take it that it is this tension Hegel has in mind when he states that the problem with the Greek gods is not that they are too anthropomorphic, but not anthropomorphic enough: Greek spirituality, Hegel writes, is merely ‘an immediate spirituality and hence a medium between what is absolutely free and what is merely natural’, and fails to proceed to ‘free’ or ‘absolute’ spirituality, to which the ‘complete opposition [between spirit and nature]’ is essential (Aesth. 1823, 158–59).
18. Henrich 1979, German original version: Henrich 1966; see also Henrich 1985.
19. See for instance Donougho 2007, Rutter 2010.
20. Henrich 1979, 111.
21. Ibid., 113.
22. Ibid., 113.
23. Ibid., 112.
24. Ibid., 113.
25. Ibid., 113.
26. Rutter 2010, 9.
27. Ibid., 11.
28. Ibid., 10–12.
29. Rutter launches the same criticism against Arthur Danto’s interpretation of Hegel: see *ibid.*, 12–14.
30. James 2009.
31. James also makes some effort to show that art can be seen to remain indispensable in modernity within a Hegelian account, for instance, by pointing out that the realist novel may constitute an important complement to a philosophical account of the modern world (such as the one developed by Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right*). However, he tends to demonstrate the indispensability of art by arguing that it can fulfill a *corrective* function with regard to Hegel’s philosophical account of the modern world. Thus he points out that the novel may be essential to make citizens aware of the tensions inherent in the modern social and political world, thus questioning Hegel’s view that the reconciliation between individual and society has been fully achieved in modernity (see *ibid.*, 91–111). Or he argues that precisely in light of such tensions, citizens may be in need of a myth such as Sorel’s ‘myth of the general strike’, which motivates them to jointly overthrow the existing political institutions (see *ibid.*, 112–28). In my view, this is too high a price to pay. The crucial task would be to show that art can be indispensable in modernity for Hegel while at the same time remaining faithful to what Hegel takes to be the central philosophical insights regarding the fundamental structure of the modern social and political world. With Hegel, art should not be seen as providing a correction, but rather as providing a complement to philosophy in modernity.
32. Houlgate 1997, 10.
33. Ibid., 13.
34. Ibid., 18.
35. Gethmann-Siefert 1992.

36. I find it difficult to reconstruct how exactly this educational process through the experience of formal beauty is to be understood according to Gethmann-Siefert; see *ibid.*, 228–30.
37. We should acknowledge here that it is perhaps not necessary to appeal to beauty in order to defend the indispensability of art in modernity within a Hegelian account. As mentioned above, some authors believe that in Hegel's view it is necessary for art to emancipate itself from beauty in modernity. On such a view, if art is to continue to be indispensable, then this will have to be the case in virtue of qualities other than beauty. According to Robert Pippin in 'The Absence of Aesthetics in Hegel's Aesthetics' (Pippin 2008), for instance, only classical Greek art is unambiguously qualified as beautiful by Hegel; romantic, Christian art already counts as '[a]rt after the beautiful' for him (*ibid.* 399.) As far as I can see, the views expressed in this article differ in some aspects from the position formulated in the earlier 'What was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel)' (Pippin 2005), which I discuss in more detail below. In particular, the aim of demonstrating the indispensability of art in modernity from within a Hegelian account is not as prominent in the earlier as in the later article. That beauty cannot function as a genuine ideal already begins to become apparent in the ancient Greek world itself for Hegel, Pippin argues, but the prosaic character of the modern bourgeois world makes it ultimately impossible to hold on to beauty as a value (Pippin 2008). Nevertheless, Pippin here makes a case for the indispensability of art, even in modernity, by referring to more general Hegelian reflections on the authority of knowledge claims and normative claims governing practical, ethical and political life. In order to be authoritative at all, such norms have to be alive and embodied for Hegel. Hence where norms or values are externalized by being expressed in aesthetic form, this is not merely a matter of complementing, for purposes of illustration, some universal claim with a particular example. Rather, for Hegel it is constitutive of the authority of any universal claim or norm that it is externalized or aesthetically expressed. For this reason, given Hegel's general views on how knowledge claims and practical norms assume authority, the artistic expression of such norms and knowledge claims will continue to be indispensable for their very validity. Pippin leaves it open, however, how precisely modern works of art would perform the task of giving life to the central modern norms or knowledge claims.

Similarly, Benjamin Rutter also argues for the indispensability of modern art within a Hegelian account, and does so by offering a detailed discussion of various aesthetic qualities that are distinctively modern in his view; beauty is explicitly not among these qualities. This is because, Rutter argues, beauty requires the presentation of a self-harmonious, aesthetic content in aesthetic form—a unity of form and content, or a 'translucence of content through form' (Rutter 2010, 122). But such self-harmonious, inherently aesthetic contents no longer have a place in the prosaic, bourgeois modern world. The task of the modern artist is rather to imbue that with life and soul that is inherently trivial, mundane and aesthetically uninspiring. The quality that may result from such successful imbuement may be called 'liveliness' (*ibid.*, 91). This is a genuinely aesthetic quality, but it is categorically distinct from beauty: not only does it not presuppose a harmony between aesthetic form and content, but in fact its creation presupposes the absence of such harmony. For while beauty appears as the manifestation of an accomplished harmony, liveliness can emerge only from an ongoing struggle for the resolution of a conflict between opposites.

38. Compare the following passages, discussed in chapter 2 of this volume, in which Hegel states that the presentation of the human individual is central to

(classically) beautiful art: VAI, 21–22/LAI, 433–34; Aesth. 1823, 36; Aesth. 1823, 157–58; Aesth. 1826A, 146.

39. Aesth. 1826, 151. See also VAI, 223/LAI, 596.
40. We are already well acquainted from real life and nature with the grapes, flowers, stags, trees, sandy shores, peasants and scenes of daily life that are represented in such works of art, Hegel states. Hence it is not the subject matter of such works that we are interested in. See VAI, 226/LAI, 598; Aesth. 1823, 301.
41. Aesth. 1826, 153; VAI, 228/LAI, 599.
42. Ibid., 228/599–600.
43. Aesth. 1826, 152–53.
44. VAI, 228/LAI, 599.
45. It is worth noting that Hegel's conception of *Schein* as outlined above bears a striking resemblance to some aspects of Adorno's analysis of artistic semblance. To begin with, for Hegel, *Schein* on the one hand means the illusory presence of some actual object, but on the other hand it means shine: the abstract, quasi-musical interplay of color. Hence in order to exhibit *Schein*, an artwork does not necessarily have to evoke some concrete illusion, it may also present simply an interplay of color that has been intentionally created by the artist. This idea closely resembles Adorno's claim that artworks exhibit semblance simply in virtue of being sensuous wholes that have been intentionally created by an artist, and that are therefore not just objects of nature or naturally given: 'They [the artworks] themselves, not just the illusion they evoke, are the aesthetic semblance. The illusory quality of artworks is condensed in their claim to wholeness' (ÄT, 155–56/AT, 134). Furthermore, Adorno takes it to be characteristic of modern in contrast to traditional art that it makes its own semblance explicit, instead of trying to conceal it by attempting to appear as real or natural (in Adorno's view, however, the attempt to conceal the fact that they are 'something made' is particularly characteristic of artworks of the nineteenth century—whereas in Hegel, this characterization seems most appropriate for classically beautiful artworks):

During the nineteenth century aesthetic semblance was heightened to the point of phantasmagoria. Artworks effaced the traces of their production [. . .]. Modernism subsequently rebelled against the semblance of a semblance that denies it is such. Here the many efforts converge that are undisguisedly determined to pierce the artwork's hermetic immanent nexus, to release the production in the product, and within limits, to put the process of production in the place of its results'. (ÄT, 156–57/AT, 135)

46. Aesth. 1823, 201. See also VAI, 227/LAI, 598.
47. Subjectivity here obviously means something different than in the preceding chapters. In the preceding chapters, the term was used in the sense of a capacity for reflection and distancing from one's natural, bodily traits. In the present context, in contrast, it refers to the quality of not being grounded in the object or rather, in this case, the content of the work of art. Hegel, in fact, distinguishes and employs different notions of subjectivity: see PhR, § 25 (the present notion of subjectivity is closest to what Hegel here lists under β) and γ).
48. Aesth. 1823, 204.
49. This may also be expressed by taking Hegel's famous statement about the loss of status of art in modernity, and applying it instead to beauty. Hegel says that 'art, considered in its highest vocation [i.e. the vocation of providing normative guidance], is and remains for us a thing of the past' (VAI, 25/LAI, 11). Similarly, one might formulate: '(artistic) beauty, considered in its highest

vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past'. It has been pointed out repeatedly that the former statement is what comes closest in Hegel's aesthetics to the claim that art 'comes to an end', which is commonly attributed to Hegel (see Houlgate 1997, Gethmann-Siebert 1992).

50. *Aesth.* 1826, 151. See also *VIII*, 223/*LAI*, 596.

51. Houlgate 1997, 17–18.

52. *Ibid.*, 18.

53. In 'Hegel and the Art of Painting' (Houlgate 2000), Houlgate pursues a different Hegelian argument against abstraction. This argument is mainly directed against Wassily Kandinsky's and Clement Greenberg's theories of abstraction. According to Kandinsky, art has to become abstract in order to gain greater expressive potential; the representation of objects in a painting distracts the viewer from the feelings that the painting is supposed to evoke. Greenberg, as Houlgate reads him, argues that the turn to abstraction in painting is a manifestation of its attempt to 'purify' itself from its traditional entanglement with other media, in particular sculpture and literature, and instead to embrace what constitutes the very essence of painting: in particular the flatness of the canvas. From Hegel's point of view, Houlgate argues here, both Kandinsky and Greenberg fail to see that the essence of painting consists in the creation of *Schein*, by which Houlgate understands the illusory, virtual, immaterial presence of the natural and human world. The creation of *Schein* has mainly two functions for Hegel, Houlgate suggests. On the one hand, by depicting human individuals in their bodily presence, their facial expressions and visible gestures, the painter avails himself of the most effective means of giving expression to human subjectivity and life (contrary to Kandinsky, who thinks that expressive power can be gained only at the price of abandoning naturalistic representation). On the other hand, by creating naturalistic illusions, the painter manifests his own freedom, by 'lightening' the physical presence of matter: he makes matter become present in a virtual, spiritually mediated way. It is true that the creation of naturalistic illusion constitutes one aspect of *Schein* for Hegel. But as discussed above, *Schein* has also another aspect for Hegel, namely the intentionally created 'musical' interplay of pure sensuous qualities such as color and light. Hence if the essence of painting lies in the creation of *Schein* for Hegel, it does not necessarily follow that painting is limited to the creation of naturalistic illusion. Houlgate does acknowledge the fact that Hegel considers the abstract, musical qualities of *Schein*, in particular the formal interplay of colors. He argues, however, that the delight we may take in such formal qualities for Hegel always has to be part of the delight we take in the way colors conjure up the appearance of objective reality. This argument is based on a single passage in the *Aesthetics* in which Hegel describes the 'objective music' of *Schein* as a 'subjective recreation of externality in the sensuous element of colors and lighting' (*VIII*, 227–28/*LAI*, 599–600). I am not convinced, however, that the 'subjective recreation of externality' has to be understood in the sense of a subjective recreation of the objective, natural world. It might also simply refer to the subjective creation of a sensuous form—a form that exhibits color and light effects, without representing any object in the world. Furthermore, Houlgate's argument against Greenberg's understanding of what constitutes the essence of painting in my view conceals the fact that there is a more general agreement between Greenberg's conception of modernist painting (or modernist art in general) and Houlgate's interpretation of the art of *Schein* as Hegel sees it. For Greenberg, it is essential to modernist art that it becomes self-referential, or draws attention to itself as art: 'Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art;

Modernism used art to call attention to art', he writes (Greenberg 1988, 6). But this can certainly also be said of Hegel's art of *Schein*, even on Houlgate's reading: painting as dedicated to *Schein* makes the artistic creation of *Schein* itself its content. This attempt of art to lay bare and bring into focus its own essence is in fact the driving force behind the turn to abstraction in art according to Greenberg. Hence while Greenberg and Houlgate's Hegel may disagree regarding what constitutes the essence of painting, the more important agreement between them concerns the fact that one of the central impulses in the 'modernization' of art is that it begins to bring itself into focus *as* art.

54. Aesth. 1823, 204.

55. VAI, 228/LAI, 599; see Rutter 2010, 116.

56. Rutter 2010, 115.

57. See Pippin 2005.

58. See Pippin 2005, 300, 304–5.

59. 'Pippin 2005, 297, 305.'

60. Pippin says explicitly that on his reading, abstract art can be seen to be making the very same point as philosophy—a point about the subjectivity and self-authorized constitution of experience—but in a nondiscursive way: see Pippin 2005, 300.

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